WE WERE SUPPOSED TO MEET TOMORROW

~ Swaraj Kansyakar

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Swaraj Kansyakar

Acknowledgement

This book was never meant to be written this way. It became what it is through moments that stayed, and through the silence of things that never found words.
I don’t have many names to mention, but I carry quiet gratitude for those who were part of my life—knowingly or unknowingly—shaping thoughts, emotions, and memories that found their place here.
Some stories are not created, they are felt. And this one belongs to those feelings.
And to the one who may never read this —
thank you for existing in my life, even if only as a memory.
— Swaraj Kansyakar

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Chapter 1 – The World Before

Before Everything Changed

“I told you—don’t make so much noise!”

The voice echoed from downstairs, sharp enough to cut through the rain. For a second, everything froze.Then—

“Run!”

Bare feet scattered across the terrace. Water splashed in every direction as chaos burst back to life. Someone slipped, someone laughed too loudly, and someone almost fell while trying to rescue a half-sunk paper boat.

Rain poured relentlessly, as if the sky had lost control.

The terrace had turned into a shallow lake—deliberately created. Bricks had been placed to block the drains, trapping the water like part of a carefully planned rebellion. Paper boats floated proudly, crashing into each other like ships in a storm no one wanted to end.

And in the middle of it, he stood.
Fourteen. Soaked. Laughing without thinking.

“Catch him! He ruined my boat!” one of the boys shouted.
“No, I didn’t! You fell yourself!” another shot back.
“Be quiet! The noise is going downstairs!”

Too late.
The footsteps came—heavy, fast, and dangerous.

“The noise is going downstairs! One day you all will break the entire house!”

Silence fell instantly, Unnatural, Complete. And then—

chaos again.

Feet rushed in all directions. Doors opened and slammed shut. Wet footprints spread across the floor. Curtains shifted. Someone hid behind a bed, someone squeezed into a corner, and someone tried—and failed—to hold back their laughter.

He ran too, not because he was scared.
But because this was part of the game.

They gathered in a small room with a loud, whirring fan. Five or six children crammed together, breathing fast, holding their laughter as if it might explode any second.

Clothes dripped. Hearts raced.

“We are safe…” someone whispered.

And that was enough. Laughter burst out again.
This was home. Not just a house—but a world of its own.

Rooms that never stayed quiet. Voices that overlapped endlessly. A family so big that silence never lasted long enough to feel real—father, mother, sister… cousins beyond counting, along with their parents.

It wasn’t a family.
It was a festival that never ended.
Days didn’t pass here—

they ran.

Afternoons belonged to the terrace. Games changed every hour—cricket with broken bats, kabaddi, pitto, chalk lines drawn for kitkit, and ludo matches that turned into arguments louder than the rules themselves.

Winning mattered. Losing didn’t last. And somewhere in all that noise—he existed.
Not the loudest, not the center. But always there.

School was different. Quieter, more controlled.
There, he became someone else.

“Roll number 27?”
“Present, ma’am.”

Not a topper. Not a failure. Just… in between.
Around eighty percent—enough to be called good, not enough to stand out.
Teachers called him sincere, classmates called him quiet.
But one person remained constant, Ayush.
Same bench, Same routine. Less talking, more understanding.

“Did you do the homework?”
“Yes.”
“Did you understand the maths?”
“Somewhat.”

That was enough.
Around them were others—Harsh, Ankit, Sachin. A group of five.

But not all bonds felt the same.
Some were close, some were just… there.

And somewhere inside him— another world existed.
He drew.

Not for marks, not for anyone. Just when words didn’t come out.
Life was simple then. Too full to feel empty, too loud to notice silence.

Too early to understand— that one day, everything would change.

Chapter 2 – In the Hands of Time

The Noise Where It Began

Too early to understand—
that one day, everything would change.

And maybe... this was where it began.

There was a part of the town that felt like it belonged to a different world altogether.

Not the familiar streets of home, not the echoing laughter of the terrace. This place was louder, faster, restless in a way that never seemed to pause. Traffic didn't slow down, horns spoke more than people, and life seemed to rush even when there was nowhere urgent to go.

He had discovered it months ago.

About three kilometers from home—not too far, but far enough to feel like an escape. For a boy in seventh grade, it wasn't a place he was supposed to go alone. But rules, at that age, often felt less like boundaries and more like suggestions.

So he created a system.

School would end. He would come home, act normal, wait just enough to avoid suspicion—and then quietly leave on his cycle. One hour. Not a minute more, not a minute less.

In that one hour, he lived a different life.

The streets there were always alive. Crowded fairs seemed to appear out of nowhere. Street vendors called out in practiced rhythm. Small cafés buzzed with chatter, marts glowed under artificial lights, and chaat stalls

were surrounded by people who believed happiness could be served on a plate for a few rupees.

And one such afternoon, under a harsh summer sun that made the air feel heavy, something shifted.

He saw them.

A group of girls, laughing around a chaat thela.

There was nothing unusual about it—just another moment in a crowded street. Or at least, it should have been. But something held his attention. Maybe it was the laughter, or the chaos of voices overlapping. Maybe it was instinct.

Or maybe... something else entirely.

Someone was being wished. A birthday.

And without thinking—something rare for him—he stepped forward.

"Happy Birthday."

The girl turned. For a moment, everything else faded.

She looked... different. Not in a way he could fully understand then, but enough to make him notice every small detail—the sunlight on her face, the slight movement of her brown hair, and eyes that didn't quite belong to that place, as if they carried a story from somewhere else.

"Thank you," she said simply, before turning back to her friends.

That should have been the end. It almost was.

He went back to his chaat, trying to dissolve into normalcy again.

But then—

"Hey... what is your name?"

He looked up.

This time, it was her friend.

For a second, hesitation returned—the familiar instinct to stay quiet, to avoid attention. But somehow, it didn't win.

"Joy."

The name came out easier than expected.

"And yours?"

"Neha."

The conversation didn't grow much beyond that. Before anything more could settle, a boy arrived, and just like that, they disappeared into the crowd—as if nothing had happened at all.

Back home, the noise of that place was gone. But something else remained—a strange happiness, a quiet confusion.

He lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, replaying the moment again and again.

How did I talk to them?
Why didn't I feel scared?

A smile came without permission. A faint blush followed, even without a reason.

And somewhere between thought and sleep, a simple decision formed—

Tomorrow... I'll go again.

But life, as always, had its own timing.

The next day—fever.

Plans dissolved into blankets, medicines, and concerned voices. The outside world paused, and he stayed inside, slowly convincing himself that maybe it had just been a one-time moment.

A coincidence. A memory. Something not meant to repeat.

Days passed—three, maybe five.

The feeling faded, buried under routine.

Until one day, without planning, he went there again.

Same place. Same chaos. Same kind of afternoon.

And there they were.

This time, he didn't notice them first.

They noticed him.

"You're... Joy, right?"

For a second, confusion flickered across his face. Then recognition settled in—the chaat stall, the birthday, that brief moment from days ago.

"Yeah..."

This time, they didn't disappear.

They stayed.
They talked.

Random things at first—almost meaningless. School complaints, pressure, teachers, studies. The kind of conversations that didn't matter, yet somehow felt important in the moment.

Time slipped.

And within that time, names found meaning.

The birthday girl—Radha.

And Neha… no longer a stranger.

But slowly, something else surfaced.

A difference.

Not just in the way they looked—but in the worlds they belonged to. Their schools were better, their lives bigger, more comfortable in ways he had never thought about before.

Fifty rupees, for him, meant something.

For them, it meant almost nothing.

For a moment, he stepped back—tried to act mature, tried to create distance, tried to remind himself that they weren't the same.

But some things don't listen to logic.

And friendships, especially at that age, don't follow calculations.

The distance didn't stay. Something else took its place.

Numbers were exchanged—not personal phones, but their parents' numbers. Careful. Limited. Yet enough.

A small connection, built under unspoken rules.

Everything felt normal then.

Maybe that's why—

he never realized how much it would hurt later.

Between Silence and Something More

Everything felt normal then. Maybe that's why he never realized how much it would hurt later.

Days stopped being ordinary after that. Without promises, without plans, something quietly began to repeat itself. The same chaat corner, the same time, the same unspoken understanding—as if both of them were following a routine written somewhere beyond their control.

They never called each other. They never said, "Let's go there today." And yet, they were always there. If he arrived early, she would come. If she got late, he would wait—sometimes pretending not to.

It became their place. Not official. Not defined. But theirs.

And somewhere in those repeated meetings, something deeper began to grow—softly, silently, almost invisibly—but never spoken, not even once.

He thought about it often. Maybe I love her. The thought came slowly, uncertain of itself. But doubt followed just as quickly. Maybe she doesn't. Maybe she just liked talking to him—the calmness, the simplicity, the way he never tried to dominate conversations. He wasn't loud, he wasn't demanding. He was just… present.

"why are you so quiet?" Radha asked once, smiling lightly.

"nothing…" he replied.

She laughed softly.

“It’s Good…. It makes less noise.”

At that age, it was rare—to observe so much without saying it. But life had already taught him in quiet ways. Being someone who had to think before spending, who calculated even the smallest expenses, had made him more aware of the world around him. Every decision carried weight. Every choice had consequence. And maybe that was why people misunderstood him.

They thought he was rich—not because he showed it, but because he never looked like he lacked anything. His control became his image, and that image… helped him.

With her too, in the beginning, it stayed the same. Radha would show him pictures—family trips, celebrations, places he had never seen.

“This is Goa” she said once, scrolling through photos.

“Nice” he nodded.

But inside, something shifted. If he has it…. Then I should have it too.

So he created something. Not lies. Not truth. Just enough to not feel small. Because at that age, ego doesn’t come as pride—it comes as a quiet fear of being less.

But as days passed, something began to change. The friendship grew deeper. Conversations stretched longer. Silences became comfortable.

And with that closeness, his “image” began to feel heavier. A version of himself that wasn’t fully real stood between them. And he knew it.

Guilt came slowly. But fear came stronger. What if she asks me to go somewhere expensive? What if I can’t keep up? What if she realizes… I’m not who she thinks I am?

So he adjusted. Quietly. Carefully.

“I don’t usually carry money. Papa directly handles expenses,” he said once.

A half-truth—carefully shaped. She believed it—without doubt. Because she was still simple in ways the world hadn’t complicated yet—kind, understanding.

And slowly… she started paying.

That’s when guilt became real—not all at once, but in moments. When she paid without thinking, when she insisted without expecting anything back, when she treated it like it was nothing. And in return, something inside him began to twist. He didn’t know how to handle it.

So it came out… differently.

“Why do you get so serious?” she asked once.

“I’m not,” he replied, slightly irritated.

She paused… then smiled anyway.

“okay..”

Sometimes, he got irritated. Sometimes, he ignored her. Sometimes, his words came out harsher than intended—unnecessary, unfair. He became something he wasn’t supposed to be—a version of himself shaped by insecurity, a version that wanted control—a small monster.

And the strangest part—she stayed. Not with anger. Not with ego. But with patience. She adjusted. She understood. She smiled—even when he didn’t deserve it.

And that… changed something.

The more she stayed, the more he fell. Not loudly. Not dramatically. But deeply. Desperately. The kind of falling that grows silently—until it takes over everything inside.

Yet even then—he said nothing. He buried it, wrapped his emotions in silence, hid them behind normal conversations, and continued the only thing he knew how to protect—friendship.

Because sometimes, what we feel the most… is exactly what we're most afraid to lose.

The Day Words Began… and Something Broke

Because sometimes… what we feel the most—is exactly what we're most afraid to lose.

The place hadn't changed. Same crowded street. Same restless noise. Same chaat stall carrying the smell of spices in the air. But now—it wasn't just a place anymore. It had become a habit. And habits… are dangerous when they start carrying emotions.

He was already there, waiting—not checking the time, but feeling it pass. And then—she arrived. Slightly out of breath. Slightly late. Just like always.

"Why are you always late?" he said, trying to sound annoyed.
She didn't stop walking. Just glanced at him and replied, "Then why do you always wait?"

For a second—he had no answer. He looked away and said, "I don't want to argue with you."
She smiled—a small, winning smile.

"Then what? We just stand here?"

They started walking. No destination. Just a direction.

"You said last time you'd come on a scooty," he said casually.
"Yeah… but my father didn't allow," she replied, mimicking his tone, "He says I'm still a kid."
He smirked.

“Well… I’m there, right?”
She stopped, looked straight at him, then laughed.
“You don’t even know how to drive.”

Both laughed—not loudly, but enough. They kept walking, steps slow, conversations lighter.

“How do you stay so calm all the time?” she asked.
He glanced at her and asked back, “How do you talk so much?”
She rolled her eyes.
“Okay, stop teasing. Where are we going?”
He looked ahead.
“For now… let’s just walk till this road ends.”
She nodded.
“Okay.”

Silence came—but it didn’t feel awkward anymore. It felt shared.

“Who all are there in your family?” he asked.
“Mom, dad… and my elder brother. He’s studying engineering in Kolkata,” she replied.
“Oh…”
“What about you?”
Instead of answering, he asked, “What’s your brother’s name?”
“Shivam. Now tell me.”
He paused and said, “In my house… there are more than fifty people.”
She stopped. “Why are you acting like this? I just asked a simple question!”
He laughed softly and said, “My mom, dad, sister… and a lot of cousins. Joint family.”

This time, she didn’t react loudly. She just looked at him—with quiet interest. Time passed. One hour… maybe two. Conversations that didn’t matter—yet somehow meant everything.

“I’m getting late. I should go,” she said.
They checked the time—seven. Too late. Without saying much, they turned in opposite directions.

“Mom, I’m back…”
“Good. No studying? Just roaming all day?”
“My exams are coming…”
“Then go study.”

He nodded. And then—started playing instead.

Days passed. And then—the routine broke.

Fever. No cycle rides. No crowded streets. No chaat corner. No her.

Phones existed—but not really.

“Don’t use the phone. Just rest.”

And just like that—silence became heavier.

He missed her. Not casually. Not lightly. Sometimes it came as irritation. Sometimes as restlessness. And sometimes—tears. Quiet ones, hidden behind excuses.

“My stomach hurts…”
“I have a headache…”

Because saying “I miss someone”—wasn’t possible yet.

Two… maybe three weeks later—he went back. Not with hope. Just memory. Same place. Same noise. But emptier.

“Heyyy Joy! Over here!”

He froze. Turned. And there she was—running towards him. Alive. Real. The same—yet not the same.

“Where have you been?” she asked, breathless.
“I… I was…”
He couldn’t answer.

“You don’t even care, do you?” she continued, slightly upset. “No message, no call… I came here every day.”
He blinked.

“Every day?”
She looked away, annoyed but beautiful—more than before.

“You came… for me?” he asked slowly.
“Yeah… you made it a habit.”

He smiled faintly.

“If you don’t come, I just come with Neha.”

Something inside him shifted slightly.

“With Neha? Where is she?”
“She went to get ice cream.”

“Hi, Neha.”
“Hi, Joy.”

“Give me the ice cream,” Radha said quickly.
Neha laughed.

“Let Joy take first… otherwise you’ll finish yours and ours too.”

All three laughed. For a moment—everything felt normal again. But inside him—something was rising. Too fast. Too strong.

He looked at her and decided—today.

“Radha… I need to tell you something—”
“Say it later! First listen to this!”

He paused.

“What?”

Neha said casually, “My boyfriend is coming tomorrow.”

Silence. Small—but sharp.

“What… you have a boyfriend?” he asked, trying to stay normal.
“You never notice anything,” Radha said lightly.

“You have to come tomorrow,” Neha added. “We can’t go alone.”

“Where are you going?”
“Come on, Joy,” Radha smiled, “you’ll see what Anshu looks like too.”

Neha cut in, “Stop flirting with him. He’s my boyfriend now.”
“I was joking,” Radha laughed.

Then she looked at him again.

“And yes… you have to come.”

“But… I have my exam…”
“Do you have it in the evening too?”
“No… but still…”
“Then come after it.”
“Enough, Radha,” Neha laughed again.

Both of them laughed—together, freely, like nothing had changed. And he stood there—smiling, nodding, listening.

But inside—something cracked. Quietly. Completely.

Maybe… she was never mine.
Maybe… I was just someone she met.
Maybe… I was stupid.

The words he wanted to say—never came out.

And for the first time—he understood something without being told: not every feeling is meant to be spoken. Some are meant to stay—and hurt.

The Day Everything Changed Without Saying It loudly

Not every feeling is meant to be spoken. Some are meant to stay—and hurt. But sometimes, they find their way out anyway.

The conflict didn't stay outside anymore. It came inside him—quietly, deeply, and refused to leave. Even when he sat with his books open, his mind wasn't there. Numbers blurred, steps slipped, and answers felt distant. His mathematics exam—something he could have handled easily—went wrong. Not because he didn't know, but because he couldn't think.

This wasn't about marks anymore. It was about what was happening inside him. He kept questioning himself.

Maybe she just saw me as a friend.
Maybe I misunderstood everything.
She never said anything… I just assumed.

And then a question that felt unfair—yet unavoidable:

Why does it always happen like this?
Why do boys fall first… and alone?

Tring… Tring…

"Hello?"
"Aunty… is Joy there?"
"Who is this, beta?"
"I'm his friend—"

Beep.

Ring… Ring…

"Hello?"
"Hello… it's me, Radha."

“Haan Radha… why did you call?”
“I was reminding you… we have to meet at the lakeside today.”
“I remember… but you calling created a problem.”
“What problem?”
“My mom picked up the phone… now she’ll think I have a girlfriend.”

A pause.

Then, a soft smile in her voice.

“Then tell her the truth.”
“What truth?”

She didn’t answer.

“I’m getting ready. Come fast… I’ll be waiting.”

A small pause.

“I don’t know how Anshu will look.”
“Why are you so excited, Radha?”
“Just come, okay?”

Beep.

He sat there, the phone still in his hand—tired, confused, and a little hurt.

I found a friend… but lost something more.

But his thoughts didn’t stop.

Anshu is Neha’s boyfriend… then why is Radha so excited? Does she like him too?

And slowly, he created his own answer.

Maybe she likes him… but won’t say it. Maybe she’s sacrificing.

A strange respect formed inside him. Radha is... different.

Tring... Tring...

“When are you coming?” she asked.
“I’m leaving.”
“I’m already on the way. Come fast.”
“Okay... hang up, mom wants to call nani.”

She laughed softly.

“Mom, I’m going for a walk.”
“Sit and study. No need to go anywhere.”

He paused. For a second, he almost listened. But then he left.

The lakeside felt different. Quieter than the streets. The noise softer, the air slower, the water still—like it was holding something.

“Hey Joy! Over here!”

He turned. She was standing near the steps, waiting.

“I’ve been waiting for so long,” she said.
“You’re allowed to come out easily... I’m the one who faces problems,” he replied.

She ignored that.

“Leave it... tell me, how do I look?”

For a moment, he forgot everything. White top. Brown plazo. Hair moving gently with the wind.

She didn’t just look good. She looked unreal.

“Nice,” he said.
“Thank you,” she smiled.

“Where is Neha?”
“She’ll come. Till then, let’s sit.”

They sat near the lake.

“How nice is today’s weather?” she said softly.
“Yeah… Neha is really lucky.”

She looked at him.

“Haan… we can be lucky too.”

He frowned slightly.

“What do you mean?”
“Nothing.”

Silence followed. Not empty—heavy.

“Let’s have ice cream,” she said suddenly.
“Look, Neha is here.”

“Hiii Joy!”
“Hi.”
“Look, Neha brought a rose and a card,” he said.
“Yeah…” Radha replied quickly.
“Anshu will be the happiest today.”
“Yeah… sure…”
“Joy, wait here. Me and Neha will get ice cream.”

They left. He sat alone, watching the lake, trying not to think.

They returned.

“Where’s my ice cream?”
“Radha has it,” Neha said.

Radha stepped forward and gave him a rose.

His mind stopped.

“What is this?”

For the first time, she looked nervous. Not playful. Not confident. Nervous.

“Wo… it’s for Anshu… he hasn’t come yet… you hold it.”
“Oh… okay.”

He relaxed, but something felt off.

“What happened to you?” he asked.
“Nothing… just waiting,” she said quickly. Neha tried to ease the moment.
“I don’t know where he is…” Radha handed him the card.
“Hold this… and read what Neha wrote… in your mind.” He nodded, opened it, and froze.

It wasn’t Neha’s words. It wasn’t for Anshu. It was for him.
A letter—simple, unpolished, honest.

(Joy,
I don’t know how to say this…
but I feel good when I’m with you.
I wait for you—even when I don’t say it.
When you don’t come… something feels missing.

You are different… and I like that.

I don’t know if this is love…
but if it is… maybe I love you.)

His hands didn’t move. But his heartbeat did—fast, loud, real.
He looked up. She was looking at him—scared, hopeful.

“Did you… write this?” he asked softly.

A pause.

“Yes… Joy.”

A small breath.

“I’m sorry… if you didn’t like it.”

Everything inside him became clear.

“No… I didn’t feel bad.”

And then, before he could think— “I love you too.”

Even he didn’t know where that came from. Maybe from everything he had been holding. Maybe from her. Maybe from that moment.

The world didn’t change. The lake was still. The air moved the same way. People passed by, unaware.
But for them, everything shifted.

And strangely, after that day, they didn’t meet. Four days. Maybe five. No fights. No reasons. Just distance.
Maybe it was shyness. Maybe guilt. Maybe the realization that something had crossed a line.
Or maybe… they didn’t know how to act anymore.

Because sometimes, when feelings finally find words, they don’t bring clarity.
They bring silence.

The Weight of What Was Never Planned

Because sometimes—when feelings finally find words—they don’t bring clarity. They bring silence. And that silence stayed.

That evening didn't feel real. The same city that never stopped talking felt quieter somehow. The lake was still, the air slower, and everything else distant, as if the world had stepped back and left just the two of them.

Neither of them spoke.

Joy picked up a small stone and threw it into the water. Ripples spread, then disappeared. Radha watched them fade.

"So... say something." She looked at him with quiet expectation.
"You already said everything." He gave a faint, almost helpless smile.
"That's not fair." She said, looking at her hands. "You can't just say one line and stay quiet." There was a slight frustration in her voice.
"I didn't plan to say even that." He avoided her eyes.
"Then why did you?" She asked, searching his face.

A pause.

"I don't know... maybe because you said it first." He spoke slowly, as if choosing each word carefully.

The wind moved her hair across her face. She didn't fix it.

"You could have said no." She said this softly, her voice a little uncertain.
"I could have." He admitted quietly.
"But you didn't." She looked at him, trying to understand his silence.

He didn't answer.
Silence returned.

"Were you scared?" She asked, lowering her voice.
"I still am." He exhaled lightly, his gaze fixed somewhere far.
"Of me?" Her voice softened, almost fragile.

He shook his head.

"Of everything else." His answer carried more weight than he intended.

She didn't understand fully, but she didn't ask more.
The silence came back—heavier this time.

"Joy... you're acting strange." She tried to smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.
"I always act strange." He said it with a faint attempt at humor.
"No... not like this." She looked at him more seriously now.

He looked at her, then away.

"Nothing changed, right?" She asked, almost hoping for reassurance.

He hesitated.

"Everything changed." The words slipped out before he could stop them, and even he realized their weight as soon as he said them.

She went quiet.

"Then... is that bad?" She asked slowly, her voice careful.
"I don't know." He admitted, his tone uncertain.
"Before this... things were simple." She spoke softly, almost nostalgic.
"And now?" He asked, though he already knew the answer was complicated.
"Now I have to think." He said it with a small, tired smile.
"About what?" She leaned slightly toward him.
"Everything." His answer felt heavy, like something he was still trying to understand himself.
"You didn't think before?" She asked, a little confused.
"Not like this." He shook his head.
"Before... it was just meeting you. Talking. That was enough." She said this with soft honesty.
"And now it's not?" She asked gently.
"It feels different." He admitted, his voice quieter than before.

Radha watched him closely.

"For me, it doesn't feel complicated." She said this with a calm certainty.

"It should." He replied, almost instinctively.
"Why?" She asked, a little surprised.

He stayed quiet for a moment.

"Because I'm not like you." He said it simply.

"What does that mean?" She tilted her head slightly, trying to understand.
"Nothing." He avoided explaining.
"No, tell me." She insisted, her tone soft but firm.
"It's just... things are easier for you." He said, finally letting it out.
"That's not true." She immediately denied it.
"It is." He insisted, though his voice lacked certainty.
"Joy, what are you trying to say?" She asked, now more serious.
"For you... coming here is normal. For me... it's not. If I come here, I think about time, money, what I'll say at home... and now it's not just meeting anymore." He explained, his words coming out slower than before.
"So... you're scared of this?" She asked, her voice soft again.
"Yes." He nodded.

This time, she didn't try to fill the silence.

"I didn't think this much before saying it." She said this honestly, almost gently.
"I know." He replied.
"I just felt it... so I said it." She added, looking at him.
"That's the difference." He said, understanding her in his own way.
"Maybe." She accepted it, without arguing.
"But I'm still here." She said this simply, with quiet certainty.

He didn't respond.

Somewhere behind them, people laughed, someone walked past, and life continued. But between them, something had slowed down.

"Joy... are you happy?" She asked softly, searching his face.
"I was." He said it without hesitation.

"And now?" She asked, her voice careful.
"I don't know yet." He admitted honestly.

She nodded, not fully understanding, but not leaving either.

They sat there a little longer—closer than before, but somehow more distant.

And without saying it, both of them had already begun to learn—liking someone is easy. But living with what comes after isn't.

Between Fear and Freedom

Liking someone is easy. But living with what comes after isn't. And now, he was living it.

Stepping out of the house had never felt this difficult. The same stairs, the same door, the same street—yet everything felt heavier than before. The phone had just stopped ringing when he moved toward the exit, trying to act normal, but his uncle's voice stopped him.

"Where are you going?"
"Nowhere... just for a walk."
"Should I ask your mother?"
"I already told her."

There was a pause, and then his uncle added, "Okay. Go. But come back on time... I need to talk to you."

Those words stayed with him—"I need to talk to you." They followed him outside and settled quietly in his mind, turning into a constant question. Did he see something? Does he know about Radha? Every thought felt real, and every possibility seemed worse than the last. But like always, he ignored it and kept walking.

Then he saw her.

Radha stood across the road, waiting. The street was crowded, with bikes rushing past, cars honking, and people moving without noticing anything around them. It was the worst place to meet her. He couldn't call her, couldn't signal her, couldn't even look at her for too long. So he did the only thing he could—he pretended not to know her.

He crossed the road like a stranger, walked past her, and said just enough:
"Wait near the mosque."

She didn't react, but she understood. He didn't follow her immediately. Instead, he stopped at a shop, bought a chocolate, waited for a moment, and then went ahead. She was already there.

He handed her the chocolate, said nothing, and sat behind her on the scooty. She started driving. A few days ago, this would have been just a conversation. Now, it was real. And strangely, he didn't feel scared. There was trust between them—quiet and unspoken.

They moved away from the crowd, into open space, into air, into something that felt like freedom.

"Where should we go?" she asked.
"Where do you want to go?"
"Somewhere you like."

He paused for a moment and then said, "I like you."

For a moment, she didn't respond. The simplicity of his words made everything heavier, more real than either of them had expected. Then he added, "I think... I love you."

She looked away, smiled nervously, and quickly changed the topic.

"Do you know a new restaurant opened near my apartment? Let's go there."
"No... your family lives there."
"I don't have a problem."

“I do.”

She frowned slightly, and he continued, “If they see me, they’ll ask questions. Maybe even want to meet my family.”

“You overthink a lot, Joy.”
“Yes… I do.”

There was a small pause before she said, “But where should we go?”

“Please,” she said softly, “it’s a nice place. No one will notice.”

He hesitated for a moment, then finally said, “Okay. But I won’t eat anything.”

She smiled and said, “You can drink water.”

The restaurant felt unfamiliar—too clean, too quiet, too different from his world. Before he could decide anything, she had already ordered: two burgers, two lattes, and one white sauce pasta.

“I told you I don’t want to eat.”
“It’s our first official date,” she said simply.

He didn’t argue again. Not because he agreed, but because he didn’t want to ruin the moment. Slowly, the awkwardness faded. They talked, laughed, and shared food, and for a while, everything felt normal.

“Bill, please.”
“It’s already done.”

He nodded, already knowing what she had done. As they stepped out, the evening felt lighter. The tension inside him hadn’t disappeared, but it had softened.

She looked at him again, playful.
“Now you have to buy me cotton candy.”
“Yes… why not.”

He smiled freely.

Walking beside her, he realized something important. She never made him feel small—not when she paid, not when he hesitated, not even when he overthought everything. She made it all feel normal.

And maybe that was why he felt happiest—not when things were perfect, but when he was simply with her.

Fear That Was Never Meant for Him

Not when things were perfect—but when he was simply with her. And maybe that was the problem, because outside that space, everything felt uncertain again.

By the time he reached home, evening had already begun to settle, but something felt off. The house was quieter—not peaceful, just different. And then he saw his uncle standing still, his face red, breathing heavy, his eyes restless as they watched everything around him. People moved carefully, avoiding him, not wanting to say the wrong thing. And suddenly, Joy remembered—"Come back on time. I need to talk to you."

A sharp fear rose inside him, and his heart began to race. Did he see me? Does he know about Radha? What if he tells everyone? In one moment, everything flashed through his mind.

"Come here, Joy."

The voice felt heavier now.

"I need to tell you something."

Joy walked slowly.

"Yes, uncle..."
"Go bring paan from outside."

For a second, he froze. Is this a test? Did he see me earlier?

“Okay…”

He stepped out, bought the paan, and returned, his heartbeat still uneven. His uncle took it, looking at him carefully.

“I feel like you’re not focusing on studies these days.”

Joy lowered his eyes.

“Sorry…”
“If this continues, your marriage will be like mine.”

Joy looked up, confused.

“With someone who doesn’t even have basic understanding,” his uncle continued.
“What happened, uncle?”
“Your aunty made dal… without salt.”

There was a pause.

“And when I told her, she said raw salt is bad for health.”

Joy didn’t know what to say.

“Now she will teach me what’s right?”
“N-no…”

Before the situation could escalate, his aunty stepped in.

“Joy, you go. I’ll handle him.”

There was a brief pause.

“His BP is already high… and now he wants to eat raw salt.”

Silence followed. And in that moment, Joy understood—it was never about him. His uncle just needed someone to release his anger on, and for a few seconds, that someone had almost become him. A quiet relief spread inside him, and the fear slowly faded, leaving behind exhaustion.

He walked away, joined his cousins, and played. Later, he sat down to study, and by the end of the day, he slept—with relief, and something else, a faint, unspoken tension lingering in the background.

The next day felt normal. School, homework, laughter, routine—everything continued as if nothing had changed. But somewhere, something new had already begun.
At first, it was just a headline, then a discussion—a new disease from China, a virus, dangerous and contagious, something about bats. But for them, it meant nothing. They were still children, and news didn't feel real unless it reached them. So they ignored it.

Life continued—school, friends, games, days passing without weight. But slowly, something was changing. Exams were getting closer, and without realizing it, everything was moving toward something else—something bigger, something none of them understood yet, something that would change everything.

Chapter 3 – The First Crack

Distance Without Distance

Something that would change— everything.

And before it even arrived, something else had already begun to change.

A week before the exams, things slowed down between them. There were no fights, no decisions, no explanations—only distance.

Calls stopped, meetings stopped, and even the small conversations faded quietly.

And strangely, Joy didn't feel as bad as he expected. Maybe it was because of the exams, maybe distraction, or maybe something he didn't want to accept. A small part of him was getting used to it.

Meeting every day, talking every day—had started to feel predictable. And somewhere inside, a thought appeared, unspoken: when love becomes easily available, people slowly stop valuing it.

The TV was on. His father lay on the bed, watching the news seriously. The entire country seemed to be discussing the budget. Joy didn't understand any of it, his mind drifting elsewhere.

"Joy, where are you?"
"Yes, Mom... I'm with Papa."
"Okay. Exams are next week. Go study."

He stayed and looked at the TV.

"Papa, what is this budget?"

His father smiled slightly.
"Suppose I earn money and give it to your mother. She manages everything—groceries, fees... that's budget."

“I still don’t understand…”
“Leave it. Focus on your studies.”

There was a pause.

“And listen… there’s a dangerous disease being discussed.”

Joy looked up.

“Don’t go outside unnecessarily,” his father continued. “Even during exams, keep distance. Give your paper and come back.”

Another pause.

“And this time… no colors in Holi.”

That line stayed.

“Okay…”

He went to study, but his mind kept moving—between exams, the unknown disease, and something else.

Then his phone rang.

Radha.

He looked at his father and cut the call, switching the phone to silent. Later, he checked—fifteen missed calls. A slight panic rose in him. He went to the terrace and called back.

“Where were you?” she said immediately. “I called you so many times!”
“What happened?”
“You tell me first—why didn’t you pick up?”
“Radha… calm down.”
“Then cut the call. I don’t want to talk.”
“Listen—”
“After ignoring me, now you want to talk?”

“I was with my father. How could I pick up?”
“You could’ve made an excuse!”
“Now you’re arguing without reason.”
“Of course it feels like that to you.”

There was a pause.

“Okay… tell me why you called.”
“Leave it.”
“Please, Radha…”
“I got a new phone today.”
“Oh… congratulations.”
“Haan… but the day got ruined.”
“What happened?”
“First time I called you… and you didn’t pick.”

Silence.

“Maybe from now it will always be like this.”
“Radha… that’s just superstition.”

A softer tone followed.
“I like you. Why would I ignore you?”
“Promise?”
“What promise?”
“Nothing…”
“Study well.”
“You too.”

The call ended.

But something felt different. Not broken—just shifted.

The next day, she called again.

“You can call too, you know.”
“Did you call just to say this?”
“No…”

“Then?”
“Is it necessary to have a reason?”

He paused.

“No… you can call anytime.”
“Just… when my phone is with me.”
“Are you jealous I have my own phone?”
“No. You’re overthinking.”
“Should I give it back?”
“Why would I want that?”

A softer tone followed.
“I wish I had my own phone… so I could talk anytime.”
“Okay…”
“Are you coming today?”
“No. Focus on studies.”

A pause.

“I just wanted to know how you are.”
“I’m fine. You?”
“Fine.”
“How’s preparation?”
“Nothing special…”

A slight pause.

“My mind is somewhere else.”
“Where?”

Silence.

“I’ll hang up now.”
“Take care.”

And after that, the silence stayed longer.
Conversations became shorter, less frequent, more formal.

Exams came.
Joy scored around 70–80. Radha—above 90. He felt happy for her, genuinely.

Meanwhile, the news grew louder. The virus now had a name—COVID-19. Cases increased, people got infected, and some died. Slowly, fear spread everywhere.
Within days, a lockdown was announced across the entire country.
And just like that, the outside world stopped.
But inside, things were only beginning to change.

Two Worlds Under One Sky

The lockdown didn't end. Days turned into weeks. The roads outside stayed empty, shops remained shut, and the noise that once filled the streets disappeared, leaving behind a strange, unsettling silence.

Inside the house, though, nothing had stopped. "Catch him! He's running!" "You can't catch me, I'm the fastest!" "Arre, that was out!" "No! It's a no-ball!" Feet ran across the terrace, someone slipped, someone shouted, and someone laughed louder than everyone else. "Uncle, catch the ball!" "I'm batting now—move!" "Papa, you also come!"

Within minutes, the entire terrace turned into a stadium. Cricket bats changed hands, arguments turned into jokes, and even the elders joined in like children who had forgotten their age. Joy laughed; for a while, nothing else existed.

"Joy! Your phone is ringing!"
"I'll see later!"
"Pick it up first!"
"Arre, let him play!"

The phone kept ringing somewhere inside the room, then it stopped. Later, when the game ended and the noise settled, he checked his phone—Radha: 3 missed calls. He called back.

“Hello?”
“Finally.”
“What happened?”
“Nothing… just called.”
“You called three times.”
“So? Can’t I call?”
“No, I didn’t mean that…”

A pause followed.

“What were you doing?”
“Playing… with everyone.”
“Hmm.”

On the other side, Radha sat on her bed. The TV played loudly in the hall, news anchors speaking about rising cases, numbers, and deaths. Her father watched silently, her brother studied, and her mother moved between the kitchen and the room. No one spoke to her.

“Joy…”
“Yeah?”
“I’m feeling very bored.”
“Watch something… or sleep.”
“I’ve done everything.”
“Then call Neha.”
“She’s busy.”
“Then… do something else.”

She didn’t reply.

“Okay, I’ll call you later,” he said.
“Hmm.”

The call ended. Radha kept the phone beside her. The room felt quiet again—too quiet. She opened a music app, played a song, skipped it, then another, and stopped midway. She picked up a notebook, drew two lines, closed it, and just sat there.

“Mom…”
“Yes?”
“I don’t feel good staying like this.”
“What can we do, beta? Everyone is at home.”
“I don’t want to stay like this.”

Her mother didn’t respond immediately, then said, “We girls have to stay inside most of the time.”

Radha looked at her, her voice softer now. “But I’m not like that.”

In the evening, she tried again. “Papa… can you get me a harmonium?”
“Not now, beta. Everything is closed. When lockdown ends, I’ll get it.”
“Okay…”

She didn’t argue.

That night, she called Joy again.

“Are you free?”
“Hmm… yeah.”
“What were you doing?”
“Nothing… just sitting.”
“Really? Not playing?”
“No… not now.”

A small silence followed.

“Joy…”
“Yeah?”
“Do you miss me?”

He paused.

“Why are you asking this?”
“Just tell me.”
“I mean… we talk every day, right?”
“That’s not what I asked.”

He didn't answer directly.

"Why are you overthinking?"
She gave a faint laugh.
"Maybe because I have nothing else to do."

On his side, someone called from another room, "Joy! Come fast, we're starting cards!"
"Coming!"

He covered the phone slightly. "I'll call you later, okay?"
"Okay..."

This time, her voice was quieter.
The call ended.

He ran back, and laughter continued. She stayed behind in the same room, surrounded by the same silence.

Days passed like that. Calls became shorter, replies became slower, and slowly—without any fight, without any decision—their worlds began to move apart.
Under the same sky, one was surrounded by noise, and the other was learning how loud silence could be.

The Weight of Silence

They still talked. Calls still happened. Conversations still existed. But something was missing—something neither of them could name.

"Hello, Radha."
"Hi... how was your online class?"
"Good. Yours?"
"Mine was also good."
"How was your day?"
"Not too good... Papa was busy watching TV, Mom was cooking and talking to Nani, Bhaiya was on his laptop."

“Oh… and you?”
“I was listening to you, calling you, remembering you, searching for you, but—”
“But?”
“Nothing… I think I’m very disturbed. I feel tired.”
“What happened, Radha?”
“One minute—”
“What?”
“My mom is calling me. She made aloo bhujiya… I love it. Bye, I’ll talk tomorrow.”

The call ended. Radha stared at her phone for a few seconds; the silence that followed felt heavier than before.

“Oh God… this boy. I’m suffering from irritation, and he doesn’t understand anything. He has his own world… no one cares about me. Why… why did you make me so alone?”

“What are you saying, Radha?” her mother asked from behind.
“Nothing, Mom… just nothing.”
“Tell me. I’m your mother.”
“Mom… Joy doesn’t listen to me. He keeps playing in his own world. You, Papa, Bhaiya—everyone is busy. I feel… lonely.”
“Don’t worry, dear. Go play guitar or sing something. I’ll come and talk to you.”
“Oh Mom… I don’t feel like singing anymore.”

No one replied after that. The room became silent again, and slowly, without making a sound, tears began to fall.

“What happened, Radha?” her father asked, noticing her.
“Nothing… just a headache.”
“Rest for a while. I’ll call the doctor.”
“No need, Papa…”
“If you’re crying, then it’s not just a headache.”

The doctor came, gave her medicines, and left. The tablets made her sleepy; she slept—not for a few hours, but almost the entire day. When she woke up, the room felt different, like time had moved without her.

“How are you feeling now?” her mother asked softly.
“Better, Mom.”
“Neha called you five times. I told her you were sleeping. Call her back.”
“Okay…”

“Hello, Neha?”
“Radha! You were sleeping for so long. Look at the time—it’s 2 PM!”
“Yeah… doctor gave me medicine. I still feel sleepy.”
“What happened? Are you okay?”
“Yes, I’m fine… just a headache.”
“Did you talk to Joy?”
“When do I even talk to him? He’s always lost in his own world. You called me five times… he didn’t even call once.”
“Maybe he’s busy. He’ll call when he’s free.”
“Busy? No one cares about me… maybe I should stop expecting from anyone.”

Her voice broke again.
“Hey, don’t say that. I’m here. Talk to me whenever you want.”
“Who knows how long you’ll stay? When Anshu calls, you also leave.”
“Okay, I won’t go now.”
“He calls you… at least someone calls you. No one even calls me.”

Her breathing became heavy; words started breaking between sobs, and suddenly, she cut the call.

Within seconds, her parents and brother came into her room.

“What happened now?”
“Why are you crying again?”
“Tell us, beta…”

“Nothing… I just feel alone.”
“But you were just talking to Neha…”

“Tell us what’s wrong.”

Her phone started ringing again—Neha calling back. She cut it immediately.

“Talk to her, beta.”
“I don’t want to talk to anyone.”
“Then talk to us.”
“No… no one understands. Everyone is busy in their own life. You all come only when something happens.”
“Then talk to Joy…”
“I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

She turned away and lay down again.

“She just woke up… and now she’s sleeping again,” her father said quietly.
“Something has hurt her deeply,” her mother replied.

That night, she ate her food silently—without a word, without a complaint. She swallowed everything: food, thoughts, emotions—all together. After that, she stopped expressing everything, not completely, but slowly.

Sometimes, when it became too heavy, she called Joy. Sometimes he picked up. Sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes he called back. Sometimes he didn’t.

And in that inconsistency, something fragile inside her began to break—quietly, without making any sound.

The Return of Light

After weeks of silence, the world finally began to move again.

Inside Joy's room, the sharp click of the striker echoed as carrom coins scattered across the board; his sister laughed while he leaned forward, focused, and for a moment, nothing outside that room mattered.

Then his father's voice broke the stillness.

"Babu... listen."
"Yes, Papa?"
"Lockdown is ending from tomorrow. Everything will open."

Something lit up inside him instantly—freedom, roads, people... and her—but just as quickly, another thought slipped in.

"So... we won't play like this anymore?"

His father smiled. "Why not? You can play... and go outside too."
"First send Rakhi to my brothers tomorrow," his mother added from the side.
"Yes, yes... I'll do everything."

The house felt lighter. Conversations flowed again, and it felt like the world had finally exhaled, but somewhere inside Joy, a small discomfort stayed—the end of something simple, something safe.

His phone rang, and he picked it up instantly.

"Hello... did you see the news?"
"Yes... lockdown is over."

A pause, then excitement rushed through her voice.

"Now we can meet again!"

He smiled. "Yeah... lakeside... ice cream."
"I'm already so happy... it feels strange."
"Okay... I'll come tomorrow."
"I'll be waiting."
"I'll tell everyone—"

“Wait.”

A pause.

“Yes?”

He hesitated for a second.
“Love you.”

Silence.

Then a soft reply.
“But I didn’t say it…”
“I know.”

A faint smile came through his voice.
“You’ll say it when you see me.”

A small pause.
“I love you… it never changed.”
He didn’t reply immediately; he just breathed, then said quietly, “Okay… bye.”

The call ended, but something stayed—warm, familiar, and yet slightly different, because sometimes even comfort changes its shape.
Joy stood up as energy returned.

“Mom, I’m going to play.”
“Wait. Check your books first. School will start from tomorrow.”
“Okay…”

He opened his notebooks and arranged everything; normal life was returning—routine, responsibility.

“Tell your father to buy you a new water bottle,” his mother said.
“Okay.”

Everything felt like it was falling back into place.

At the same time, in another house, Radha stood in front of the mirror. She adjusted her hair, then again, noticing small things she had ignored for weeks.

“Mom… how do I look?”
Her mother turned. “What kind of question is this suddenly?”
“No… just asking.”

After a small pause, she added, “My hair looks fine, right?”
“Yes… you look very pretty.”
“Mom… have I gained weight?”
“No.”

Her mother smiled slightly. “Why are you asking all this today?”
“Nothing…”

A pause.

“Maybe because school is starting.”
“Oh yes… your father will go to the showroom again. Everything will start.”
“What preparation? You cook every day anyway.”
“Yes… but now everyone has to wake up on time.”

They both laughed softly, and for a moment, the heaviness inside Radha faded; the silence didn’t feel suffocating anymore.

There was movement again, purpose again—something to look forward to.

The world was opening. Roads would fill, schools would start, lives would move forward.

And somewhere in all of this, two hearts—once close, now distant—felt like they were about to meet again.

At least, that’s what it felt like.

The First Crack

Morning returned—but not gently. It came with noise, hurry, and unfinished things.

Joy's room was a mess; his uniform lay half-prepared, one sock missing, time slipping faster than he could hold it as he moved from one corner to another, irritation building with every second.

"Mom, where are my socks?"
"Check under the bed, inside your shoes."
"They're not here! My shoes are in my hand, but no socks!"
"Look properly—almirah, table, everywhere!"
"Please help me, Mom, I'm getting late!"
"Oh God... this boy never lets me relax. Listen please.. I Can't find Joy's socks!"
"Yes, I'm coming..."
"Hurry up, Papa!"
"Why are you shouting? I'm here... what happened?"
"My socks..."
"Here they are. You never look properly and say they're lost."

Within minutes, everything settled; bag on his shoulder, shoes tied, water bottle in hand—Joy rushed out, carried by the noise, the warmth, and the comfort of a house where someone was always there to fix things before they broke.

In Radha's house, the morning existed—but it didn't feel alive.

Everyone was present, but no one was truly there. Her mother moved between kitchen and complaints, her father spoke about work, her brother packed for Kolkata—conversations happened, but none of them included her.

She got ready quietly.

"Listen, when will the maid come? I am tired of doing all the work these days."

“She will come from tomorrow… but still you will have to manage.”
“But the lockdown is over.”
“Yes… but it can come back again.”
“I can’t handle this much work anymore…”
“Radha, you should also help a little.”
“Why? Doesn’t she have studies?”
“I am not saying always… just a little.”

Radha stood there, listening, not reacting—and slowly, that old fear returned, the same one from lockdown, the same suffocating stillness.

Without thinking further, she picked up her phone and called Joy.

“Hello, who is this?”

She froze—his mother.

The call ended immediately. She tried again.

“Hello, Radha?”
“Your mother picked up last time.”
“Are you crazy? You will get me caught. You didn’t say anything, right?”
“No, I cut the call.”
“Okay… what happened?”
“I need to talk to you. It is important.”
“We are meeting today anyway. Tell me then. I am getting late for school.”
“Listen—”
“Later, later… bye.”
Beep.

The call ended. She stood there, staring at the screen.

“He is still the same…”
A small pause.
“Nothing has changed.”

School reopened. Life restarted.

But something between them didn't return the same way.

After classes, Radha went to their usual place—the same stall, the same starting point of everything—and she stood there, waiting.

One hour.
Two hours.
Three hours.

People came and left; the sky changed, the noise softened—but he didn't come.

On the other side, Joy was stuck in extra classes; something he had meant to tell her, something he had forgotten, and now it mattered.

By the time he reached, the place was empty.

His heart dropped.

He called again and again. No answer.

Almost an hour later, her call came back.

"Radha, why were you not answering? Why did you cut my calls?"
"It is my mood, Joy. Why are you calling me?"
"Because I am your boyfriend. I have the right to call you."
"No."

A pause.

"You don't have any right... not even to call yourself my boyfriend."
"What happened? What did I do?"
"You didn't do anything."
"Then tell me..."
"You never call me. Why so many calls today?"
"Because we were supposed to meet. I am standing here right now."
"Then stand there for three hours."

Silence.

“What?”
“I was waiting for you for three hours. Where were you?”
“I had extra classes… I—”
He stopped.

“I forgot to tell you.”

That small truth came out quietly—but it was too late.

“If you had told me, I would not have waited.”
“I know… I am sorry. Just come now.”
“No need. We are not even friends anymore.”
“Radha, relationships don’t break like this—”
“Oh really? Then wait for three hours. I will come.”

A pause.

Then he said, tired,
“No one waits like that. I am leaving.”
“Yes… go. I did not expect anything from you anyway.”

A breath.

“Selfish.”

Beep.

Silence.

Not loud. Not dramatic. But heavier than anything they had felt before.

That evening did not end them—but it changed something. A small crack appeared, invisible, but real.

Hours later, around 8 PM, Radha came back to the same place. Same road. Same silence. She knew it was pointless. She knew he would not be there.

But hope does not listen to logic.

And then—

“Hey… Radha.”

She froze, turned—and he was there.

“Really… you are here?” her voice broke slightly.
“You waited?”
“Yes.”

He did not explain, did not justify—just stood there.

“I waited.”

Something inside her broke… and healed… at the same time.

She ran toward him and held him tightly, as if something had almost slipped away.

“Thank you…”

Her voice was softer now—not dramatic, not loud—just real.

“I thought… you would not come.”

A Night That Felt Like Forever

The road back home felt quieter than usual—not completely silent, but softer, the kind of silence that comes after something has already happened.

The traffic hadn't fully returned, shops were half-open, people moved slowly without urgency; the world outside felt calmer, but inside him nothing had settled. His heartbeat still carried the weight of the evening—the waiting, the argument, the way she hugged him—everything stayed with him.

As soon as he reached home, the calm broke.

His family was standing at the doorstep, waiting.

"Where were you till now?"
"I... I went for a walk."
"At this time? Where exactly?"
"I was just... nearby..."
"Do you even know what time it is?"
"Yes, Papa... it's 9."
"And since when have you been missing?"
"Mom... I just went an hour ago. Before that, I was studying on the terrace."

His mother looked at him carefully.

"Studying? Did you check the terrace?"
"Yes, I checked. He wasn't there."
"My books are still there, Mom. You can go and see."

There was a brief pause.

Then everyone moved toward the terrace.

The night air felt different now—heavier, quieter, not peaceful anymore.

One by one, they looked around—and there they were—books, copies, pen, pencil—everything lying exactly where he said.

For a moment, no one spoke. They believed him... but not completely. Something didn't match, something felt off—but no one said it out loud.

Later that night, the house returned to silence; doors closed, lights dimmed, voices disappeared.

Joy picked up his phone and called her.

“Hello… Radha?”
“Yes, Joy… what happened?”
“I almost died today.”
“Don’t say that. Are you okay?”
“Yes… I’m fine.”
“Then what happened?”
“When I reached home, everyone was waiting for me at the door.”
“What? Then?”
“They asked me directly where I was. I said I went for a walk.”
“Did they believe you?”
“Not really. They had already checked the whole house.”
“Then how did you manage?”
“I told them I was studying on the terrace… and luckily my books were there.”
“When did you keep them there?”
“I didn’t… I mean… I studied there yesterday and forgot to bring them back.”
“I don’t even know why they didn’t see it earlier.”
“Good…” she said softly. “You got saved.”

A small silence followed—quiet, but heavier than usual.

“Joy…”
“Hmm?”
“If something happens… if someone finds out… what will you do?”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean… us.”

He didn’t answer immediately. For the first time, the question felt real—not playful, not casual—real.

“I don’t know…” he said slowly. “I’ll manage.”
“You always say that.”

“Because I have to.”

Silence stretched again—longer this time.

“Radha… can I ask you something?”
“Hmm…”
“Are we… doing this too fast?”

She didn’t reply immediately.

“Like… meeting like this… lying at home… hiding everything…”

He struggled to find the right words.

“I mean… I’m just thinking…”
“So now you think it’s wrong?”
“No… I didn’t say that.”
“Then what are you saying?”
“I don’t know…”

That was the truth.
Her voice softened, but carried weight.

“I knew it.”
“Knew what?”
“That one day… you’ll feel this.”

He stayed quiet, because somewhere deep inside, he knew she was right.

“You won’t ignore me now, right?”
“No… I won’t.”
“Promise?”

He paused for a second.

“…Yes. Promise.”

But even as he said it, something inside him didn't fully agree.

That night felt different.
For the first time, they talked beyond routine—beyond jokes, beyond casual questions. They talked about fear, about getting caught, about what could go wrong, about things they had never thought about when everything felt easy.

Words came slowly, carefully, as if both of them were trying to understand something they had entered without thinking.
Joy felt closer to her than ever before, and yet a quiet uneasiness stayed inside him.
Radha felt lighter hearing his voice, but somewhere she sensed it too—something had changed. Not clearly. Not loudly. But enough.

They kept talking—trying to fill the silence, trying to hold onto something that had suddenly started feeling fragile.
Joy would remember that night—not as the happiest, not as the worst—but as the moment when everything became real.

Because sometimes, love doesn't break in one moment; it changes slowly, quietly, from the inside.

When the World Felt Different

Days passed, and slowly everything around them began to return to normal. Schools reopened, routines came back, and life started moving again. But something had changed within them. Not loudly, not clearly—but quietly. Both of them now understood their feelings. They didn't need to say it again. They knew—they were in love.

Joy's day at school looked ordinary on the outside. He entered the classroom expecting to sit with Ayush like always, but things were slightly different now.

"What happened, Ayush? Why aren't you sitting with us today?"
"Ma'am separated us. We got caught talking in class yesterday."

Joy nodded and went to sit with Harsh instead. Harsh was also close to him, someone who shared his interest in drawing. Their small world of sketches and imagination still existed, untouched by everything else.

“Harsh, what are we drawing today?”
“I already made half of it at home.”
“Really? Show me.”
“How is it?”
“It’s really good. Wait, let me copy it, then we’ll draw together.”
“Okay, then we’ll compare.”

They both started drawing like always. There was no competition between them, no pressure to win. They praised each other, laughed, and stayed comfortable in their own space where both were always winners. But even in that moment, something felt missing. Joy had not told Ayush anything about Radha. The lockdown had created a silent distance between them. For the first time, he was hiding something from his best friend.

On the other side, Radha’s day was completely different. Her class had a viva, and the topic was simple—global warming. Something everyone had prepared. Everyone except her.

“Radha, roll number 5.”
“Yes, ma’am…”
“I gave you a topic. Start your speech.”

Her mind went blank. She stood there, trying to speak, but no words came out. Not even a single sentence. The silence lasted for a few seconds, and then the class burst into laughter.

“She is so dumb.”
“How does she even get such high marks?”
“She doesn’t even know global warming?”

Some students came closer just to mock her.

“Radha, do you even study? Or is something wrong with you?”

She wanted to cry, but she controlled herself. Crying there would only make things worse. So she quietly went back to her seat, holding everything inside, pretending nothing happened. But something inside her had already started breaking.

After school, she booked an auto to go home.

“Bhaiya, I need to go near Pepper Restaurant.”
“40 rupees.”
“Okay, let’s go.”

After a few minutes, she stopped him again.

“Please wait for a moment.”
“What happened, ma’am? Hurry.”
“My friend is coming. We need to pick her up first.”
“Where?”
“Near Canary.”
“That will cost 70 extra.”
“Make it 50.”
“No.”
“Okay, I’ll take another auto.”
“Fine, sit. I’ll go.”

They picked up Neha and dropped her first. Now Radha was alone in the auto. As it continued moving, something started feeling wrong.

“Bhaiya… where are we going?”
“This is your route.”
“But I never told you my exact address…”

A strange fear started growing inside her.

“Please stop the auto here. I’ll go from here.”
“We’re almost there.”
“No, please stop…”
“There’s nothing to worry about. My job is to drop you safely.”

His smile didn't feel normal. It felt uncomfortable. Her heartbeat increased. Her hands started sweating. Her breathing became heavy.

"Please... stop the auto..."

For a few seconds, he didn't stop. Those seconds felt endless. Then suddenly—

"Sorry, ma'am. I missed the turn earlier. That's why it looked different."

He turned back and finally stopped near the restaurant.

"See, I told you. I'll drop you at the right place."

Radha quickly stepped out. Her legs felt weak. Her body was trembling, and her breathing was uneven—as if she had just escaped something dangerous.

She rushed home.

"Mom... give me water..."
"What happened, Radha? Why are you sweating like this?"
"The auto driver... he took a different route... I told him to stop but he didn't... he was smiling strangely..."
"Relax, calm down..."
"I'm not going to school anymore."
"Don't panic. Your father will drop you."
"No, Mom... please..."
"Okay, take a few days. Calm yourself first."

That night, Radha didn't talk much. Not to her parents, not to anyone. Not even to Joy. Days passed, and she remained silent. For the first time, the girl who used to talk endlessly had nothing to say. Somewhere far from her, Joy had no idea what she had just gone through.

Distance Without Explanation

Days passed, and still—nothing changed. Joy called her every day. Sometimes she ignored him, sometimes she declined the call, and sometimes she answered.

“Joy… I can’t talk right now… I’ll call you later.”

But she never did. Joy kept trying—not because he didn’t understand, but because he didn’t want to accept it. He followed the same routine—the same places, the same streets, the same food—but everything felt different, empty, as if something was missing from everywhere he went.

One evening, he stood near their usual spot and saw Neha.

“Where are you?”
“I’m just behind you.”
“What are you doing here?”
“Nothing… just came to eat. Want to join?”
“No.”

She looked at him closely.
“Why do you look so sad today?”
He hesitated for a moment, then finally asked, “What happened to Radha?”

A pause.
“She doesn’t talk to me. She doesn’t meet me. It was never like this before.”

Neha’s expression turned serious.

“You don’t know?”
“Know what?”
“There was an incident.”

His expression changed immediately. “What happened?”
“She didn’t tell me directly… but I called her mom.”

Joy leaned in slightly.

“Just tell me clearly.”

Neha took a breath.
“While coming back from school… she took an auto. The driver took a different route. She got scared. She kept asking him to stop. Later, he dropped her at the correct place, but she was shaken.”

Silence fell between them. Joy didn’t speak.

“So much happened… and she didn’t even tell me?”
“I thought you already knew.”
Joy stood still for a moment, then suddenly said, “I’m going to her house.”

Neha looked at him. “I think you shouldn’t go…”

But he had already made up his mind.
When he reached her house, he stood at the door for a moment before knocking.

“Hello, aunty…”
“Yes, beta?”
“Is Radha home?”
“Yes… who are you?”
“I’m Joy.”
“Oh… come inside.”

Joy stepped in.

“Aunty… how is she now?”
“She’s fine… I’ll call her.”

A few moments later, Radha came.
“Hi, Joy.” Her voice was normal—too normal.
“What happened? Why aren’t you coming?”
“Nothing.”
“Don’t worry… Neha told me everything.”
“Oh…”

A heavy silence followed. Her mother came with snacks.
“Mom... we’ll go to my room.”

They went inside. Her room was neat, controlled, safe.
“Your room is really nice.”
“I decorated it.”

She looked at him.
“Why did you come?”
“Why aren’t you answering my calls?”

A pause.

“Nothing... I’ll come from tomorrow.”
“Whatever happened... just forget it. Relax.”

She nodded.
“I’ve already forgotten it.”

Her words sounded normal, but her eyes didn’t.
“Stay strong.”

She smiled faintly. “It was nice that you came.”
“You’re looking nice too.”
Then— “Okay... go.”
“Otherwise mom will doubt.”
He tried to smile. “So you’re sending me away now?”
She didn’t respond. “Go talk to mom. I’m going to sleep.”

And she walked away.
Joy stood there, confused. He came to understand everything, but left with more questions.

That night, he realized something.
It wasn’t just silence anymore.
It was distance.
And distance is harder to fix than silence.

Silence That Grew Between Them

Joy kept thinking about Radha, about her silence, about her distance, about the way she had changed. Something had shifted—but he couldn't understand what.
Was she okay? Or was she hiding something? Did she love him more than he realized... or was she trying to protect him? The more he thought, the more he got lost.

That evening, his father spoke. "Lockdown is starting again."

Joy froze. "What?"
"Yes. Cases have increased."

Silence followed, but his mind was loud. Lockdown again... then I won't be able to meet Radha...
He didn't show it in front of his family.

"Food is ready."
"Yay! Holiday again!"
Joy smiled, but only on the outside. Inside, nothing felt right.

Then his phone rang.
"Radha."
"Joy... from tomorrow... we can't meet."
Her voice was different, heavy.

"Why are you crying?"
"I'm not..."
"Lockdown is starting."
"Yes... I know."
"These lonely days are back... I can't handle this."
"What can we do? It's not in our control."
"You don't care, Joy."

That line hit.

"You have people around you. I have no one."

“You have your parents…”
“They are busy.”
“Even my brother is gone.”

Silence.

Then he said softly, “I’m here. You can talk to me anytime.”

Her voice changed.
“I know you say that… but you don’t pick calls. You say ‘later’… and that later never comes.”

Joy paused.

“I won’t do that now. I’ll pick your calls. I’ll call you too.”
“Promise?”
“I promise.”

Silence.

“I don’t trust your promises anymore.”
“I won’t disappoint you.”
“You always say that.”

He had no answer, because she was right.
Silence filled the call—only their breathing remained.
Then the call disconnected.
Neither of them knew who ended it, but both felt it was the other. And that moment changed something.

Days passed.
Calls continued, but something was missing.
“Okay… I’ll go.”
“That’s enough.”
“I’m busy.”
“I’ll call later.”

The conversations became small, dry, and empty. No emotions—only words.

One day, Radha fainted. But Joy didn't know. She didn't tell him. She waited—for him to ask, to notice. But no call came. No concern. Nothing. And that silence hurt more than anything.

She began to believe he didn't care anymore. Her trust broke slowly, quietly—and she started ignoring him more.

Joy noticed, but misunderstood.

"If she doesn't care... why should I?"

Joy had family, noise, distractions. Radha didn't. She was alone. And that made all the difference.

She cried alone, stopped playing music, stopped making cards, and sat by the window, staring... thinking... breaking.

Everything they had built was fading, not because of one big reason, but because of small misunderstandings and the lack of communication.

The Edge of Change

Between the lockdown, one day a rally of police parade passed outside Joy's house. There was loud noise—whistles, drums, footsteps, and announcements. The police were saying that the lockdown would soon be removed. After almost two years, with only a short break of a few months in between, life was finally about to return to normal. People were happy. There was excitement in the air.

"Papa, why are the police blowing whistles?"
"Son, the number of COVID cases in India has reduced, so lockdown will end soon. This is their way of expressing happiness."

“But won’t they have to go back to work again? Then why are they happy?”
"Hahahaha... you will understand these things when you grow up."

Joy smiled, but his mind was already somewhere else. He immediately called Radha.

“Radha, the lockdown is going to end.”
“Yes, I heard.”
“Aren’t you happy?”
“What does lockdown have to do with me?”
“That’s strange... we will finally meet and you’re not even excited.”
“Who told you that we are going to meet?”
“Before lockdown we decided that we will meet.”
“When did we decide that?”
“Arre we always meet...”
“Yes, but now I don’t want to meet.”

Her voice weakened as she said that.

“Why? We decided this...”
“When did we decide? I never said that.”
“Radha, you said it when I came to your house... you told me to go and meet the next day... then lockdown happened.”
“Oh, did I say that?”
“Yes... don’t you remember?”
“I remember.”
“Then we are meeting, right?”
“No.”
“Why?”

Joy’s voice started shaking.

“Did you ever tell me that you wanted to meet me?”
“But lockdown was there...”
“I have work, I’m leaving.”
“Radha, please... I swear on me, complete the conversation.”
“Your swear... it doesn’t matter to me.”

Radha started crying.

“What happened, Radha? Why are you not telling me?”
“In these months how I have lived… only I know. You never called… you never even asked.”
“But you will tell me then only I will know…”
“I have told… you ignored it… now I can’t tolerate it anymore.”
“I really don’t know anything, Radha… you were not like this before… what has happened to you?”

After hearing this, Radha cut the call.
Joy stared at his phone, confused and irritated.

“I don’t know what has happened to this girl… she neither calls herself, and when I call, she gets angry at me…”

He called her again and again.

Radha saw the phone ringing. She didn’t mute it. She didn’t answer. She didn’t decline. Her fingers moved towards the screen… but as soon as she tried to pick the call, she broke down completely and declined it.

Radha sat on the floor, crying uncontrollably.

“What happened, Radha? Why are you crying?” her mother asked.
“Mom… take me somewhere… I don’t want to stay here…”
“You shouldn’t say like this, dear… everything will be fine… you are not alone…”
“Yes… but…”
“Nothing… wipe your tears… and pick Joy’s call, he has been calling for so long.”
“I will call later…”

She started crying even harder, unable to control herself.

“Did you take the doctor’s medicine?”
“Yes… I’m feeling sleepy… I’m going to sleep…”
“You just woke up… first talk to Joy…”

There were more than 7 missed calls.
Finally, Radha answered.

“Yes Radha… why did you cut the call… are you okay?”
“You stay quiet for a while…”

And then she started crying loudly… almost screaming.
Joy held his phone too tightly and stayed silent.
For the first time… he didn’t know what to say.

Chapter 4 – The Beginning of Us

Growing Connections

The last day of lockdown had finally arrived.

Joy lay on his bed, eyes fixed on the slow-moving fan above him. The blades kept turning again and again, as if nothing had changed. But inside him, everything felt stuck.

He kept thinking about himself.
Did I do anything wrong to anyone?
Why did Radha behave like this? Why did she cry?
I didn't do anything that could make her cry...

Memories kept coming back—his moments with Radha, her words, her expressions—but the younger Joy still couldn't understand where he went wrong.

After a long silence, he made a decision.
He would talk to Radha directly.
But doubts didn't leave him.

"Will Radha pick up my call?
If she picks up, will she start crying like last time?
Or this time also will she give the same excuse that even after crying I didn't ask about her?
Yes... that must be the reason."

At that moment, Joy began to feel something shift inside him... like he was slowly recognizing his mistake.

"But what should I do now... I can't call her... she won't talk to me... and I can't even see her crying.
But if I don't call... then this will be my biggest mistake."

Time passed slowly as Joy kept thinking.

Next Day

The sound of honking auto-rickshaws echoed outside Joy's home. The streets were filled with a long line of traffic. It almost felt like people had suddenly been released from jail—everyone wanting to move, to live, to run—but somehow forgetting how to.

Joy looked outside and remembered—
He had wasted the previous day just thinking... doing nothing.
This time, he decided.
He picked up his phone.

Ring... ring... He called Radha.

"Hello Radha..."
{No, I am her mother speaking}
"Aunty, please give the phone to Radha."
{Beta, she is sleeping}

Just then, Radha's voice came from the other side.
"Whose phone is this, Mom?"
"Joy's... he wants to talk to you"
"Tell him I am sleeping"
"Beta, talk to him... till when will you keep yourself away from everyone"

"Wait a minute beta, Radha is coming now"

"Yes Joy... after many days you called"
"Are you okay, Radha?"
"Yes... what will happen to me, you tell"
Her voice sounded tired... distant. "Your voice sounds very sad."
"Nothing like that... maybe it's a network issue"
"Radha... you always say things like this... as if I won't understand anything."
"You remembered me after so many days... lockdown has ended... but I don't want to meet you, I am not coming"
"Will you only speak everything... or will you give me a chance to speak also?"

"Then speak... what do you want to say"
Joy took a breath. “Sorry Radha... I know I troubled you a lot.”
"So...?"
“I am not calling you anywhere to meet.”
"Then why did you call?"
Joy’s voice softened. “Because I got scared... I felt you were crying because of me... that’s why I didn’t call you again... I didn’t want you to cry again.”

There was a pause.
"Oh... so now you want me to cry, that’s why you called?""
“Radha... you are misunderstanding everything... I just want you to be happy... always.”
"Yes... I am happy."
“Radha... please don’t hide anything from me... I felt that you cried because of my call.”
"Oh... so you felt that?"
“Radha... please give me a proper answer.”

There was a slight change in her voice.
"I was not sad because of your call... I was sad because you didn’t call... what do you even think of yourself..."

Joy fell silent, For a moment, he didn’t respond.

Then he spoke again, softly.
“I am sorry, Radha... but at least give me a chance to correct my mistake.”
"Sorry... but you are very late."

His eyes widened slightly.
“What do you mean I am late? Are you breaking friendship with me?”
"When did I say I am breaking friendship?"
“Then what do you mean?”

A pause.
"I will tell you myself when the right time comes... for now you hang up... I have tuition class now.""

Call cuts...
Joy slowly kept the phone down.
He didn't move.
He just sat there... lost in his thoughts.

Closer than Yesterday

After a few hours, Joy called Radha again. But she didn't pick up. He tried once... then again... without even waiting between calls. He kept calling her repeatedly.

Finally, Radha answered.
"What is it... have you lost your mind? Who calls this many times? Give me a second to breathe."

Joy didn't slow down.
"Radha... are you coming to meet me? I'm waiting at our meeting spot."
"I told you... I have tuition."
"No tuition lasts more than two or three hours... it's already very late. Are you coming or not?"
"No."
"Radha... I'm coming to your house."
"There's no need for that."

A long silence followed, Neither of them spoke.
But neither disconnected the call.
It was as if both were waiting... for the other to break first. Then suddenly—

"Fine... you come to my house."

Joy immediately replied.
"I'm already right below your house... at least come and get me."
"If you want to come, come on your own. I'm not coming." radha replied.

Again... silence.
Then after a moment— "Alright... wait... I'm coming."

The call ended.

Radha rushed down the stairs.
Her footsteps were quick... her breathing uneven.
She reached the entrance and said— "Hurry up.", "Yeah... I'm coming."

Joy replied, walking toward her.
"Can't you run?"

"I said I'm coming... why are you in such a hurry?"
Both were slightly out of breath.

They entered the house. Radha's mother sat on the sofa with Joy, while Radha walked toward the kitchen.

"So beta... what brings you here today?" her mother asked.
"I... I was asking why Radha hasn't been talking to me..."

Radha immediately came out.

"If you have something to talk about, talk between yourselves... don't talk about me."
"But Radha... I came here to ask about you."

A pressure cooker whistled in the background.
Radha turned sharply and went back into the kitchen.

Joy noticed her behavior and murmured, "She's behaving a bit strange..."
Radha's mother replied calmly, "No... she's fine. You haven't met in a while, so maybe she's just feeling a little awkward."

After a few moments, Radha came back.
"Joy... come here."

They both went to her room.
The room looked familiar—neat, well arranged, almost the same as before.
But something was missing, The teddy bears.

“Why aren’t your teddy bears here? You used to have so many…”
“Yeah… I’ve packed them in a box and kept them in the storeroom.”
“Why? They looked really nice…”
“Yeah… but I got bored of them.” Her voice was low… distant.

Joy observed her closely, Something was off.
Her eyes… her tone… her restlessness.
She wasn’t the same Radha.

“Why are you so tense?” Joy said gently.
“It’s just you and me here. No one else. Why are you panicking?”

He tried to calm her and handed her a handkerchief.
Radha wiped her face.
“Yes… no one else…”
“Do you think I’m a stranger?”
“No… no… I didn’t mean that… I was just repeating your words to calm myself.”

Then Joy’s eyes fell on a medical prescription lying on the table. He picked it up.
“What is this?”

Radha’s expression changed instantly.
She rushed forward and snatched it from his hand.
“How dare you touch my personal things!” Her voice rose… almost breaking.

Joy froze for a moment.
Then, gently… he held her, Not forcefully. But with concern, Trying to calm her trembling state.
Slowly… he guided her to sit. Radha resisted for a moment… then gradually stopped.
Her breathing slowed, Her body relaxed… slightly.
Joy looked at her… still holding the prescription in his hand. And then…
He began to read it carefully.

A Step Deeper

The prescription mentioned a term—scopophobia. The hospital name written on it looked like NeuroMind. Joy didn't understand everything, but he understood enough to realize it was connected to mental health. He looked at Radha, confusion and concern mixing in his voice.

"Radha... what is this? Are you ill?"
"No... nothing," she replied quickly. "It's just a fake report for my school absences."

Joy shook his head.

"No, Radha. Don't fool me now."
"I am not trying to fool you," she said, her voice becoming distant.
"I don't want you to take me seriously. You should be happy in your life... and leave me alone in this house."

Joy frowned, confusion deepening.

"Radha... I don't understand anything, but this looks serious. You should have told me earlier." Her expression hardened.

"Now you are going to leave me... our friendship is broken now."
"No, Radha... never." Joy's voice softened. "I loved you... I will never leave you in any situation."
"But you did... many times before."

Joy stayed silent, Then he spoke, quietly, accepting something within himself.
"Then I was wrong... maybe I was a kid before. But not anymore. I won't repeat my mistakes."

Silence fell. Even the faint breeze from the window became audible.
Then Joy said softly, "I need to talk to your mother."
Radha looked at him. "What do you want to talk about?"
"I don't fully understand this prescription... and I think it's serious. I need help."

They both walked into the hall.

“Aunty… what is scopophobia? It’s written here,” Joy asked.
Radha’s mother looked surprised. “Oh… so Radha told you everything?”

She paused.
“Go, Radha… to your room.”
“No aunty,” Joy quickly said. “She didn’t tell me anything. That’s why I am asking you.”

Radha quietly walked away, Her mother took a breath.
“Scopophobia…” she began slowly, “is a kind of fear… a fear of being seen or observed by others.”
“Fear of people…?” Joy repeated, stunned.
“She doesn’t go outside at all. I don’t even know how she came downstairs when you called her.”

Joy remained silent.
“She only talks to you on calls,” she added. “With us… she barely speaks… always avoids interaction.”

Joy’s voice came low.
“She doesn’t talk properly even to me… she always makes excuses.”
“That’s not entirely true,” her mother said. “She behaves like this only with you.”
“Does she not fear others?” Joy asked.
“We live with her… she is normal with us. But outside… she avoids everyone.”

Joy exhaled slowly.
“How did this happen suddenly?”
“It didn’t happen suddenly,” she replied. “It started during the lockdown… but we didn’t notice.”
Joy lowered his eyes. “I noticed something too… but I couldn’t understand.”

A silence spread between them. Joy held the prescription tightly. His eyes grew moist as he read the words again and again… but now all he could see was Radha behind those lines.

“How did this happen?” he asked softly.
“The doctor said it could be trauma,” she replied. “From what she told us… it might be because of that auto incident.”
“Auto…?”
“Yes… once, the driver took her on the wrong route. She got very scared.”

Joy nodded slowly.
“Yes… she told me that. But he dropped her safely later.”
“Yes,” she said, “but maybe that fear stayed inside her.”

She paused.
“And the same day… something happened at school too. Some kind of humiliation… she never talks about it now.”
Joy asked softly, “Will she be okay?”
“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Right now, she is being treated online. But soon… she needs to visit the clinic.”

Joy tried to hold himself together.
“Don’t worry… she will be fine,” she added.
“Okay aunty… I’ll leave now.”
“Alright.”

Joy stepped out. Inside the house, Radha’s mother called her.
“Radha, come here.”
“Coming, Mom.”
She sat beside her. “Tell me… what do you think about Joy?”

Radha hesitated.
“Mom… why are you asking this?”
“He cares about you… right?”
“Yes… he is a friend,” she said after a pause. “But… he doesn’t care that much.”
“Is he just a friend… or something more?”

Radha froze. She said nothing.
“You can tell me,” her mother said gently. “I’m not stopping you.”
“No… nothing like that.”

“I won’t have any problem even if you have a boyfriend. Just talk to him properly… try to stay connected… and improve.”
“No, Mom,” Radha said firmly. “I don’t have a boyfriend… and I don’t want one.”

Her mother smiled slightly.
“By the way… Joy is a very good boy.”

Radha’s lips curved into a small, shy smile. Her mother noticed it immediately. Gradually… her tension eased. She even let out a small laugh.
“I told you… nothing is hidden from me,” her mother said softly.

Radha lowered her gaze… still smiling faintly.
“Study well… stay happy… and get better soon,” her mother added.

Radha nodded.

She went back to her room, closed the door, and slowly pulled the blanket over herself—as if trying to hide from the world that she feared.

Walking Through Fear

The next day, Joy sat alone at the chaat stall. Two cups of tea were placed in front of him, Untouched.
The sky above was heavy with dark clouds, as if the weather itself carried grief.

The shopkeeper glanced at him. “Your friend didn’t come today?”
Joy gave a faint smile. “The weather… it feels strange today. It used to feel nice before.”
The shopkeeper looked at the second cup. “I don’t understand your feelings… but here, take your tea. I’ll keep the other one for madam. If she doesn’t come, it’ll get cold.”
“No… please give it to me,” Joy said softly.
“I ordered it for myself.”

He picked up both cups—one after the other—and drank them silently.
He sat still for a moment.
Then a single tear slipped from his eye and fell without making a sound.

"I'll leave now," he said.
He stood up and walked away. No direction. No destination. Just walking... as if movement could carry away the weight inside him.

After some time, he reached Radha's house.
Knock... knock, The door opened.

"Oh, Joy... you're outside? Come in."
"Aunty... how are you?" he asked.
"You already know, beta..." she replied softly.
"And Radha... how is she?"
"She's inside her room."
"Can I meet her?"
"Yes, of course. Sit—I'll bring juice."
"No aunty... it's okay. Just bring it for her."

Joy walked toward her room, Knock... knock.
"Who is it... Joy?"
"Yes... open the door."
She opened it slowly. "What's wrong with you, Radha... why are you running away from everything?"

She looked at him.
"Don't lecture me..." she said softly.
"Just sit here quietly."

He sat beside her. And without saying anything, he gently rested his head in her lap. Holding her hand... placing it near his chest.
A quiet moment.
"What are you thinking?" she asked.
"Nothing..." he whispered.

He wanted to say more. But the words stayed trapped inside him.
Knock.

“Radha… beta… the doctor has come,” her mother called.

Radha slowly removed her hand, drank water, and walked out.
“Joy… you come too.”

The doctor examined her. Asked questions. Then said calmly,
“You should do yoga, breathing exercises, and try to stay relaxed.”

He looked at Joy. “Who is he? Your brother?”
“No sir… he is my friend,” Radha replied.
The doctor nodded. “You should take her outside sometimes. Let her see the world… it will help her recover.”

Then he continued softly,
“Radha, this kind of fear grows when you stay inside too much. Exposure will help.”
Radha’s mother asked, “Is this common?”
The doctor replied, “Yes… many people feel like they’re being watched. But when that feeling becomes overwhelming… it becomes scopophobia. It’s rare.”
He added, “And honestly… this is the first case I’ve personally seen this intense.”
“I’ll take my leave now.”

After he left, Radha spoke quietly,
“Am I troubling you all… too much?”
“No, beta…” her mother said gently.
“Listen, Joy… take her outside. Let her go out with you.”
“No, Mom…” Radha said firmly.
“I won’t go anywhere.”
Joy smiled slightly, “Then I’ll bring the world inside your house.” A small attempt at humor. She didn’t smile, But after a moment of silence… she agreed.
They stepped outside. An old man stood near the gate. Radha froze.

“Radha… why did you stop?”
“That man is standing there… let him pass first…”

“Radha… he won’t do anything. There will always be people outside. Will you stop everyone?”

But her fear had already taken control.
Her breathing became uneven. Her body tensed. Sweat appeared on her skin. Her hands trembled.
Anyone could see—she was terrified. As they walked, she kept stopping again and again.
At one point, she held Joy’s hand so tightly it hurt.

Joy looked at her gently.
“Keep your eyes open… I’m right here. No one will harm you.” He guided her forward. “Come on… let’s go. Don’t stop here.”
Then softly, “Let’s have some tea.”

Trying to make her feel safe, Trying… again and again.
Because now— this fear was no longer just hers.
It was something he was beginning to carry too.

Learning to Walk Again

Joy and Radha began stepping outside more often.

Not in a dramatic way, not with sudden change—but in small, careful attempts. The kind that barely notice themselves improving. But something was shifting in Radha. Quietly. Steadily. Like a wound slowly learning to heal.

At the tea stall near the chaat shop—the place that had quietly become theirs again—they sat together as before. The routine itself felt grounding, almost like it was stitching back a part of their old life.

Radha watched him for a moment, then spoke softly.
“Joy… do you love me, or is this just sympathy?”

The question came without warning, but Joy didn’t flinch.
“What are you saying? Of course I love you.”

She lowered her gaze, her voice softer now, more uncertain.
“Then why don’t I feel as close to you as before?”

Joy didn’t rush to answer. He let the silence sit for a moment, thinking, searching for the right way to say something that mattered.
“Maybe… because we still don’t fully understand what love is.”

The air between them eased slightly. Not completely, but enough.
Radha gave a small smile—gentle, almost childlike.
“We’re still kids…”
There was honesty in her tone. Something untouched by pretense.
Joy looked at her, his voice steady but sincere.
“Being with you… I’ve learned things about life that I never understood before. Sometimes it feels like even grown-ups don’t understand this much.”

She turned away, embarrassed, trying to hide the faint warmth rising in her expression.
“Now you’re making me blush… I asked seriously.”
Joy smiled faintly, then spoke more quietly, “Forget everything for a moment… just think about the future.”

Their hands found each other naturally, No hesitation. No force. Just a quiet, familiar connection.
People moved around them, voices and footsteps passing by, but Radha didn’t notice anymore.
For the first time in a long while—she wasn’t afraid. On their way back, Joy glanced at her.

“I think you’re getting better now.”
Radha looked back at him, her voice calm, but with a quiet certainty. “I can stay with you forever."

They reached the building.
“Can you go to your room alone?” he asked gently.
Her grip tightened almost instantly. She hesitated, her fear returning just as quickly.

“Joy… I’m trying… but I can’t go alone. Please stay with me.”
“Try once,” he encouraged softly.
But she shook her head. “No… please…”

Joy understood. This wasn’t defiance. This wasn’t weakness.
Her comfort was tied to him—but so was her fear tied to everything else.
“I’m right here,” he said. “Just walk slowly.”

She nodded, though her breathing was already uneven. “Hold my hand… please.”
“I’m right behind you.”

She started climbing the stairs, one step at a time, each movement cautious, controlled.
Then she stopped, A man was coming down.
In an instant, her body stiffened. Her breathing turned shallow. Her hand pressed against the wall for support, while the other instinctively reached back toward Joy—but he was a step behind.
Out of reach, Her balance slipped.
Everything collapsed into a moment of panic.
Joy rushed forward and caught her just in time, but she had already stumbled.
The man stepped closer, concerned. Before anyone could process the moment— Radha screamed.

“Uncle… please go away! I’ll manage!”
“Joy… help me…”
“Don’t scream… people will gather,” Joy said quickly, trying to steady her.
“I’m sorry… I couldn’t control it,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

He supported her carefully, holding her upright.
“Are you okay?”
She nodded weakly. “Take me to my room… please.”

He guided her upstairs without another word.
Inside, her mother immediately asked, “What happened?”

Joy explained calmly, keeping it simple.
“She tried to come up alone… then someone was coming down… she got scared and lost her balance.”
“Is she hurt?” her mother asked with concern.
“No, she’s okay.”
From inside the room, Radha’s voice came softly. “I’m fine, Mom…”

Later, Joy left.
“Joy… where were you?” his mother asked as soon as he returned.
“Ayush came… I went with him.”
“Ayush? He was just here looking for you.”
Joy hesitated, then pulled out a small sticker from his pocket. “Look… he gave this to me.”

His mother looked at him, her eyes narrowing slightly.
“Why are you lying?”
For a brief moment, he felt caught. “I was with him… just now…”

She didn’t argue further. Instead, she simply called Ayush to confirm. After that, she said calmly, “Next time, inform me before going anywhere.”
“Okay, Mom.”

He nodded and went into his room, closing the door behind him.
The moment he was alone, he called Ayush.
“Hey… thanks, bro. You helped me.”
“Why do you keep disappearing like this? And why use my name?” Ayush asked.
“Just… help me if something goes wrong,” Joy replied quietly.
“How will I help if I don’t even know? At least inform me.”

Before the conversation could continue, his mother entered the room. Joy ended the call quickly, opened his books, and pretended to study. But his eyes weren’t on the pages.

His thoughts were somewhere else—still tangled in everything that was happening, and everything that wasn’t being said.

The Quiet Return of Time

Days turned into weeks, and weeks slowly dissolved into months. Life, as it always does, continued moving forward—quietly, almost unnoticed.

One morning, Joy got ready for school as usual. His movements were steady, familiar, almost automatic. The rhythm of his life had begun to stabilize again.
“Mom, is my lunch ready?”
“Yes. Come, eat your breakfast first.”

He sat down and ate without much conversation, his mind calm but distant in a way that had become normal over time.
Soon, he left for school.

The assembly ground was filled with voices, footsteps, and morning energy. A girl stood on stage, singing the prayer. Her voice was soft yet clear, spreading gently across the ground, reaching everyone.
Joy listened quietly.
For a brief moment, he wanted to appreciate her—say something, acknowledge the effort. But he held back. His world didn’t encourage open expressions like that.

“She sings really well,” he murmured to Ayush beside him.
“Yes… but keep quiet. The teacher’s watching,” Ayush replied.
“Close your eyes,” the teacher instructed. “Focus on the prayer.”

After the assembly, the usual rush began. Students moved in groups, shoes scuffed against the floor, shoulders brushed, and voices overlapped in the narrow corridors. It was chaotic, loud, and perfectly normal.
Joy blended into it.
He wasn’t exceptional. Not the top student. Not the loudest. Not the most noticed.

But he was consistent.

And somewhere along the way, he had begun to change.
These days, he laughed more. Spoke more. Lived more.
Not dramatically—but enough to feel the difference.
One afternoon, he leaned toward his friends with a slight smile.

“Listen… I have a plan.”
They leaned in, curious, “Next period is games, then break. After that, three consecutive math periods.”

He paused briefly.
“If we skip… we’ll get some free time.”
One of them frowned. “And if we get caught?”
“We won’t,” Joy said confidently. “Washroom, water, fee counter—there are enough excuses.”

They exchanged glances, then laughed quietly.
For a moment, school felt less like pressure and more like life itself.
After classes, they walked together—talking, joking, studying, wasting time without guilt. It felt easy. Familiar. Light.

But while Joy’s world had expanded… Radha’s had slowly shrunk.
Her days were quieter now. More isolated. More contained within the walls of her home.

One afternoon, during a holiday, Joy visited her. From the outside, the house looked normal, Calm, Ordinary.
But inside, something felt different. A stillness, A silence that didn’t feel empty—but heavy.

“Radha… Radha, where are you?”
“Shhh…” her mother whispered. “She’s sleeping. Sit here.”
“It’s okay… I’ll wait,” Joy said softly.

He stepped into her room and sat beside her bed.
She was asleep, her face calm, almost fragile in its stillness. Joy watched her for a long time without saying anything.
Not thinking, Not reacting, Just observing carefully.

As if even a small sound might disturb the fragile peace she was holding onto.

His hand moved slightly toward her hair—hesitant, gentle.
But before he could touch her, she stirred.
Immediately, Joy pulled his hand back and stepped away, keeping distance.
“Aunty… where are her toys?” he asked quietly.
“Under the bed.”

He nodded and crouched down.
One by one, he picked them up—handling each item with care, as though they held more than just physical presence.
Then, just as carefully, he placed them back. Exactly where they belonged.
Not just as objects…
But as pieces of a life he was still trying to understand. And maybe—trying to hold together.

A Moment That Felt Like Stillness

Another day passed.
Joy and Radha went out together on a scooty. Radha was driving, steady and careful, while Joy sat behind her, holding on quietly.
The wind moved past them as the road stretched ahead, carrying with it a rare sense of calm.

“Come,” Radha said softly, “I’ll take you to my uncle’s place today.”
“I don’t feel like going anywhere,” Joy replied.
“If you don’t come… you won’t even see me.”
He frowned slightly, confused. “Why would that happen?”
“My dad is going to Noida for work. Mom can’t stay alone at home.”
“Oh… so you’re shifting there?”
“Yes… but it’s just a flat. Our real house is here.”
She paused for a moment before adding, “I’ve never even stayed there before.”
“So you’ve always lived here?”

“I’ll tell you everything later,” she said. “First… do you want chocolate?”
“You want one?”
“Yes… come on.”

They stopped at a small shop, bought chocolate, and shared it without overthinking anything. For a brief moment, life felt simple again—free from complications, free from questions.

Soon, Radha parked the scooty in a narrow lane. A quiet house stood ahead.

“Where did you bring me?” Joy asked.
“My uncle’s house.”
“I told you I didn’t want to come here.”
“I’m not taking you inside,” she replied calmly. “Just look at it.”
“Why?”
“From tomorrow… I’ll be staying here with my mom.”
He looked at her, processing the words slowly. “Then how will I meet you?”
“You can call me… I’ll come and pick you up.”
“But your health…”
“I’ll manage.”

Her voice was gentle—but firm enough to silence any argument.
“If I want to meet you… I can do at least this much.”

Joy gave a small, reluctant smile. “You’re starting to talk like in movies. Watch less of them.”
She smiled faintly in response, then pointed ahead. “Come… I’ll show you something else.”

They walked to an open field.
It was wide and quiet, untouched by noise or crowds. The kind of place that felt unfamiliar to Joy—but strangely natural to Radha.
Here, she looked different, Relaxed, Unburdened, Almost… free.
Suddenly, she grabbed his hand. And before he could react—
she ran.

They reached a pond.
Green water stretched across its surface, reflecting the fading light of the sky.
Joy stared at the center, confused.

“Radha... there’s a well in the middle... and water is flowing into it... how is that even possible?”

For a moment, the sight felt unreal—like something beyond his understanding. Radha laughed softly.

“That’s not a well. It’s just a passage. Water flows from here to another pond.”

He nodded slowly, He didn’t fully understand.
But he smiled anyway.
“From tomorrow... you’ll stay here?”
“Yes.”

She looked at the water, her voice quieter now.
“Dad won’t be there... so we’re shifting.”

Joy stayed silent for a moment. “Radha... I don’t think I’ll be able to come here.”
Her expression shifted slightly. “Why... you don’t want to come?”
“It’s not that. I do want to. But with school and tuition... I won’t have the time.”

Silence settled between them. Not heavy—but thoughtful.
“We’ll manage... later,” she said softly.

And then, without warning, she leaned onto his shoulder. No hesitation, No fear.
Just a quiet, natural moment. The world around them seemed to slow down.
Joy didn’t move away this time.
Instead, he gently placed one hand around her, holding her closer, while the other rested on the ground beside them.

They sat there together, Quiet. Not needing words.
Just sharing the moment.
As the sky dimmed and the light faded, time seemed to stretch around them—soft, still, and infinite in a way that felt both comforting and uncertain.
And for the first time in a long while...

everything felt like it was exactly where it was supposed to be. Page 25 — A Moment That Felt Like Stillness

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A Morning That Didn’t Feel Still

On a quiet Sunday morning, Joy woke up early—around 6 a.m.
The world was still asleep.
He stepped onto the terrace, where the cool air brushed gently against his face. The sky was slowly awakening, pale light spreading across the horizon, touching the trees that swayed in the distance.

Joy walked slowly, But his mind was not calm, It was restless, Unclear.
Heavy with thoughts he couldn't name.
He picked up a small stone and threw it against the wall.
The sharp sound echoed in the silence, He walked again.
Picked another stone, And threw it again and again.

Each impact felt less like play—and more like an attempt to release something trapped inside him. Something he didn't fully understand, but couldn't ignore either.
After a while, he took out his phone.
And called Radha, No response.
He stared at the screen for a moment... then looked away, as if expecting something to change on its own.

Meanwhile, Radha sat quietly near the window. Her phone was on silent.
Her eyes remained fixed outside—on the field, the pond, the open space.
Everything looked beautiful. But not to her.

"Mama..." her voice was soft.
"This field... this pond... everything looks so beautiful."
Her mother replied gently, "If you go there and walk a little, you'll feel fresh."
"No..." Radha said quickly.
"There might be people there."

Her voice carried more than just fear.
There was hesitation, Uncertainty. Something deeper that she herself couldn't explain fully.
Her mother tried again. "Go once. There's no one."

But Radha didn't move. She stayed there, Still, Silent.
Lost in her thoughts.

After some time, she picked up her phone and called Joy.

“Hey Joy… what are you doing?”
“I was calling you… you didn’t pick up,” he said.
“Oh… I didn’t notice.”

For a moment, there was silence between them. Then she spoke softly.
“Can you come here?”
“Where are you?” he asked.
“At mama’s house.”

Joy paused, Then spoke carefully.
“That place is too far… I can’t come by cycle. And this early… no auto will be available.”
“…Okay.”

The call ended. A few minutes later, Radha called again.
“Listen… I’m coming to you.”
Joy was taken aback. “What? Why suddenly—”

But the call ended before he could finish. He stood still for a moment, thinking.
Then said to his family,
“I’m going out with Ayush.”
He informed them, asking him to cover if anything was asked.

Meanwhile, Radha had already made her decision. She walked toward the scooty, Touched it.
And froze.
Her breath changed—suddenly shallow, unsteady. Fear rose inside her without warning.

She stepped back, Ran toward the house.
Paused.
Tried to steady herself, Tried to breathe.
Then came out again.
This time, she sat on the scooty, Her hands trembled slightly.
She tried to start it. But a man passed nearby.

And something inside her broke, The fear deepened.
She lost control and dropped the scooty, leaning against the wall, struggling to hold herself together. A small cut formed on her shoulder. But she didn't even notice, Her mind had already slipped somewhere else.
Only one thought remained: "I need to get away."

Somehow, she gathered herself.
Started the scooty, And drove.
Fast.

"Hey Joy... come hurry!.... sit here," she said, her voice rushed.
But Joy gently stopped her. "You look like you're in a hurry."
"Yes... I mean—" she stopped, then shook her head. "Leave it."
"Relax. Sit properly... don't fall."

A small smile formed on her face. A fragile moment of normalcy.
She sat behind him, holding his shoulders.
Then slowly, she rested her head against him, And began to hum, Soft, Light.
Almost like a whisper carried by the wind.

"You sing really beautifully," Joy said.
"If you want... you can listen anytime," she replied.
"Will you always sing?"
"No..." she smiled faintly. "But you can record it."
"Hahaha... that's a good idea."

They reached near the pond, And sat there. Time seemed to lose its meaning.
Three hours... four hours... They didn't count, They didn't notice.
Only silence, presence, and something unspoken between them.
Finally, they said goodbye.

That evening, Radha's mother spoke to her uncle.
"She is living in fear... and becoming frustrated."

Her father listened silently.

After a pause, he said,
“Keep watching her… and if anything goes wrong…”
A brief silence followed. “…inform me.”

Between Fear and Applause

There was a festive atmosphere in Radha’s uncle’s house.
Laughter echoed through the walls, and music floated through the air as people moved around, talking, smiling, celebrating.
It was her uncle’s wedding day. But Radha sat alone, Quiet. Detached from everything around her.

“Radha, come here… join us!” her cousin called out.
“No… I’m fine here,” she replied softly.
“Come on, dance with us!”
“No, Ruchita… please. Let me stay here.”

Her mother stepped in gently. “Let her be… she’s not feeling well.”
Radha called her mother closer, lowering her voice.
“Mom…”
“Yes?”
“I don’t want to stay here… there are too many people.”
“Then go upstairs and rest.”
“I will.”

She walked upstairs, entered a room, and closed the door behind her.
Inside, there was a bed, a window, a door, a flower pot—everything a room should have. But she noticed nothing.
Her eyes stayed fixed on one point, empty and distant, as if she had withdrawn from the space itself.

After some time, she called Neha and Joy on a conference call.
“Hello?” Neha said cheerfully.
“I’m at a wedding… you both have to come.”
“I’ll come!” Neha replied without hesitation.
“And you, Joy?”
“I can’t… I have to stay home.”

Silence fell, Radha's voice softened.
"You've always been there for me... and today... you won't come?"
"I'm still with you," Joy said gently. "Just not physically."
He ended the call.

Neha sighed. "I don't think he'll come."
"If he doesn't come... I won't attend either."
"Don't be stubborn. He has his reasons."
"I'll talk later..."

The call ended, And silence returned.

Radha turned on the music, But it didn't help. She stood up and began practicing her steps, One step. Then again and again.
Her movements were precise, almost mechanical—repeating the same patterns over and over. Not for performance...but for control.
More than twenty times.
As if perfection could push fear away.

Finally, she gathered her courage and went downstairs.
The moment she stepped into the hall—
the noise hit her, Laughter, Voices, Music. Too much, Too loud.

Her breathing changed—shallow and uneven.
She turned back and ran into the room. Inside, she drank water quickly, trying to calm herself. She sat down.
But couldn't stay still. She stood again.
And resumed practicing again and again.
Her feet began to ache, Her knees hurt. A small cut appeared. But she didn't stop.
Because stopping... meant surrendering to fear. Until her body gave in, and she fainted.

When she opened her eyes, people were around her, Concerned, Quiet.
"I want to be part of everything..." she whispered.
"But I can't handle this fear..."
"How will I go to Jamshedpur tomorrow?"
Her mother held her hand tightly "I'm here."

“Don’t worry.”

Radha’s eyes filled with tears.But slowly… her breathing steadied.
And she calmed down.

The next day, preparations began again.
“Radha, come for the puja,” her mother said.
“I will… Neha will come.”
Neha arrived shortly. “Where is Radha?”

She joined the family, blending into the celebrations, carrying on as expected.
Meanwhile, Radha sat quietly in the car with Neha.
Joy was somewhere else—living his normal day. But for Radha—
those small calls with him meant more than the entire wedding around her.

During the function, people danced, spoke, and performed.
“Radha, come dance!” Neha called.
“No… I can’t.”
“Come on… you practiced so much.”
“I can’t…”

Neha held her hand, Radha resisted. Then paused.
And said softly, “I can sing.”
She stepped forward, Nervous, But steady.
And then she began. Her voice filled the room, Soft, Pure. Almost fragile—but steady enough to hold the silence, People stopped, Listening.
The entire space seemed to pause for her.
When she finished— applause followed, Smiles, Admiration, Recognition.

That night, around midnight, Radha called Joy.
“What happened? Calling so late?” he asked.
“I sang today… in front of everyone.”
Her voice carried quiet pride, “I feel… really good.”
“That’s amazing.”

“Sing for me too.”
She smiled, And sang. Just for him.
In that moment— fear, distance, and everything in between faded away… and only her voice remained.

The Weight of What Cannot Be Said

Three days after the wedding, Radha and Neha returned. Life resumed as usual, but something within Radha had changed. The next day, they called Joy to meet them near the lakeside.

When Joy arrived, he immediately sensed something different. Not in the place, but in them. Three familiar faces stood together, yet there was an unfamiliar distance between them. A quiet awkwardness hung in the air.
Neha leaned slightly toward Radha and whispered,
“You can do it. You have to tell him. I’ll stay a little away… just say it when you’re ready.”
Joy looked at them, confused “What are you talking about?”
Neha smiled casually, “Nothing for you. It’s between me and Radha.”
“Then why did you call me here?”

Radha stepped in quickly.
“It’s nothing like that… I just wanted to meet you. It’s been a long time.”
“How are you feeling now?” Joy asked.
“I’m fine…”
She paused before adding, “But there are too many people here… can we go somewhere quieter?”
“You’re scared?”
“No…”

She avoided his gaze. “Just… uncomfortable.”

A silence followed.
“You even understand what you’re saying?” Joy said lightly.

Radha looked away and pointed toward a tree.
“See that tree? There’s a red rose on it… can you bring it for me?”

Joy nodded and walked away. The moment he left, Radha's breathing changed. Her hands trembled slightly as fear slowly took over again.

"What do I say... how do I say this... I can't..."
"Just say it," Neha whispered. "Don't think too much."
"And listen... Anshu is here. I'm going."

Before Radha could respond, Neha left.

Joy returned with the rose. "Happy Rose Day, Radha."

Radha didn't question Neha's absence. She simply accepted the moment. They began walking slowly, and silence settled between them. It wasn't empty—it was heavy, filled with things neither of them could express.
After a while, Radha gathered courage and handed him a small wrapped gift.

"Don't open it now. Take it home... read it alone."
"What's inside?" Joy asked.
"You'll understand."
A pause, "Please... don't read it in front of anyone."
Joy nodded, "I should go now..."
"Won't you drop me?"
"Already?"

She smiled faintly, but her eyes remained unchanged.

That night, Joy sat alone and opened the gift. The words were quiet, but heavy.
Full of hesitation, Full of longing, Full of fear.
(I want to spend a day with you...
a day that's just ours...
but I don't know if I should...
If you don't feel the same...
please don't hate me.)

Joy read slowly. Then, after a long silence, he smiled.

Not because it was simple—but because it wasn't.

On Valentine's Day, Joy brought chocolate and went to Radha's old house.
She was already there, waiting.
"Let's go somewhere..." she said softly.
"I haven't been out properly in a long time. Will you take me?"
"Of course."

This time, Joy drove.
Radha sat behind him, holding him firmly, They didn't talk, They didn't need to.
Only the road, And everything they were feeling—but not saying.
They rode for nearly two hours in silence.
When he dropped her off, she stood still for a moment before leaving.
But someone had already seen them—from the balcony, Her uncle.

"Where were you?"
"And why were you with that boy?"

Radha froze.
"We were just at the lakeside..."
"You know you were with a boy."
"Yes, but—"
"No 'but'."
"I'll inform your father."
"I didn't do anything wrong..."
"I saw everything."

Her mother stepped in.
"Bhaiya... leave it. She hasn't done anything wrong."
"You don't understand."
"What did I do?" Radha asked, her voice trembling.
"I know everything."
"Then tell me—what did I do?"

Her voice broke, Her mother held her tightly.
"She didn't do anything wrong. She just went out."

“I’m calling your father.”

After the call, her uncle said,
“After her exams… I’ll come and take both of you.”

That night, Radha broke completely.
“Mama… how can you say that?”
“Don’t you feel ashamed?”
“Calm down, beta…”
“I know you…”
“Do they want to send us away?”
“No… your father is coming.”
“Mama has changed… since mami came…”

Her emotions exploded as she cried, shouted, and let everything out that she had been holding inside for too long.

Chapter 5 – Distance & Fear

Under Pressure

After everything that had happened, Joy couldn't focus anymore. His exams were near, but his mind refused to stay still. He kept walking back and forth, trying to study, trying to concentrate—but failing each time. Every thought led back to Radha, pulling him away from the pages, making silence feel louder than words.

Just then, his phone rang.
"Hello?"
"Who is this?"
"It's me... Radha."
"Which number is this?"
"My mom's phone. Save it."
"Where is your phone?"
"My uncle took it."
Joy stopped walking. "What? Why?"
"He doesn't like me talking to a boy... and he saw me with you."
There was a pause, "Didn't your mom explain?"
"She tried... but he isn't listening."

Another pause,
"After exams... Dad is coming."
"And then?"
"I'll go with him."
"To Noida."

For a moment, Joy said nothing. No reaction, no question—just silence. It felt as if the words hadn't fully reached him yet.
He slowly placed the phone in his pocket.

"Hello? Joy?"
No answer.
"Are you there?"
Silence.

She called again.
“Hello?”
“Where did you go?”
“I’m here… I was listening.”
“Can you come right now?”
“Your uncle—”
“I’ll handle him.”

Her voice had changed. Not afraid—just urgent, certain.
Joy didn’t think twice. He left, took an auto, and reached near her place.

“Mom… I’m going near the pond. Joy is coming.”
“But your uncle—”
“I said I’ll manage.”

They met at the same place—the pond, the quiet path—but everything felt different. The same place no longer carried the same ease.
Radha held a notebook in her hands.

“What happened? Why did you call me so urgently?” Joy asked.
“Do I only remember you when I have problems?”
“No… I didn’t mean that.”
“Then sit. Study with me.”
“I couldn’t focus alone.”

Joy looked at her “For this… I came all the way here?”
“For you… it’s small.”
She paused, “For me… I don’t know when I’ll leave.”
“I don’t know when I’ll see you again.”

Her words were not dramatic. They were simple. Real.
“Radha… there’s still time.”
“Time doesn’t always stay.”

She smiled faintly.
“Come… I’ll teach you.”

They began studying together, quietly trying to bring back a sense of normalcy.
“Done. Test me if you want.”
“Okay… tell me—what is punctuation?”
“Umm…”
“Stand properly first.”
“This isn’t even in syllabus…”

They laughed, Just for a moment, things felt light again. Then Joy noticed someone approaching.
“Someone’s coming… he looks upset.”

Radha turned, Her expression changed instantly.
“That’s… my uncle.”
“What are you doing here?” his voice cut through the air.
“We’re studying.”
“This is the same boy?”
“Yes… but don’t say anything to him.”
“Son, you should leave.”
“You’re not going anywhere. I called him here,” Radha said firmly.

Her voice shook, but she didn’t step back, Her mother arrived.
“Radha… is this how you talk?”
“Ask him first… why he’s accusing me.”
“I just brought water and an umbrella.”
“And this is how she behaves?”
“I don’t know anything…” her voice rose.
“But he is no longer my uncle.”
“I don’t want anything from him.”

The words came out fast—too fast. Then, suddenly—
“I’m sorry…” Joy said quietly, stepping forward.
“I’ll go now. We’ve studied enough.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He left.

“See?” her uncle said. “Because of this… he left.”
“Sometimes… just leave me alone.”

“You always wanted us close. Now you want distance?”
“When I needed you… I was alone.”
“You weren’t there.”
“So now… don’t come.”
“Why are you so angry?” her uncle asked.
“Please… don’t talk to me like that.”
“You don’t have that right.”

She ran inside, closed the door behind her, and sat at her table.
She opened her books and stared at them, The words blurred.
But she kept looking.
As if studying was the only thing she could still control.

After that, Joy still came sometimes. They studied over video calls.
But something kept breaking between them—arguments, silence, distance.
And slowly… their love began learning how to survive—
under pressure.

The Last Meeting

The house felt unusually quiet that day.

In the hall, Radha sat between her parents. Her father had just arrived, and there was a seriousness in the air that no one was openly acknowledging. From the kitchen came the soft sound of oil frying—her aunt was making gujiyas. Her uncle had stepped out to bring fresh juice.

But inside Radha, everything felt unsettled.
Her father looked at her calmly.

“What was your uncle saying about you?”
“Papa… are you also believing him?”
“No, no… I was going to come take you anyway.”

She lowered her eyes for a moment, then spoke again.
“Can’t we go back to our old house?”

“No, beta. My work is in Noida. I can’t leave you both alone here.”
“But you’ll be busy there too… then we’ll still be alone, right?”
“That’s different. At least I’ll be able to see you every day.”

She took a deep breath, trying one last time.
“Papa, I don’t want to go. Look… I’m fine here now. I’m not even scared anymore.”

There was confidence in her voice—but it was fragile.
“There you’ll get better opportunities… good college… better future. What is here?”
“But my friends are here… how will I leave them?”

Just then— Joy and Neha entered. Her father stood up.
“You all talk. I’ll just meet your uncle.”

As soon as he left, Radha turned toward Joy.
“Joy… I don’t want to go. Please convince him.”

Joy looked at her… but his answer wasn’t what she expected.
“You have to go, Radha. You’ll get a better university there.”

She froze “How will I leave all of you?”
Neha spoke softly— “I’ll also leave soon… I’ll go back to my home in a month or two.”
Radha turned to Joy again “And you?”
“I’ll stay here… waiting for you.”
Her eyes filled instantly. “No… I don’t want to go. Do something… please stop him. Should I act sick? Should I faint? Tell me something, Joy…”

Her voice was breaking now. Joy’s heartbeat raced. Everything around him blurred. The only thing clear was Radha—standing in front of him, asking him not to let her go.
For a moment… he almost broke.
But then— “Radha… should I tell everyone what happened on Valentine’s Day?”

Silence, A sharp, sudden silence. Radha stopped completely.

She looked at him like she didn't recognize him anymore.
"Say it... become my enemy if you want... but I still don't want to leave you..."
Her voice was no longer loud, It was defeated.
Joy forced himself to stay strong.
"You have to go... and you shouldn't go crying like this. I'll come to meet you when we grow up. Till then... we'll talk on calls... video calls..."

She stood still. Then slowly— "Okay... I'll go... none of you understand me..."
Tears rolled down her face. Joy held his own tears back—just to give her strength. From outside—
"The luggage is packed. Radha, beta, come... we have to leave now."

Everyone moved toward the car.
The moment came faster than anyone expected.Before sitting inside, Radha turned back.

She held Joy's hand tightly.
"I will miss you..."

And then—
She kissed his hand... and gently touched it to her forehead.

A silent promise.
A silent goodbye.

The car started.
No one said anything. Everyone just watched.
Until the car disappeared, Joy and Neha walked back quietly.
No words, No expressions, Just emptiness.

Inside the moving car, Radha sat looking outside.
"Why did we have to leave so suddenly?"
No one answered.
"Will we ever come back again?"
Her mother smiled faintly "When your uncle has a baby... we'll come again."

Her father looked at her "How are you feeling now? Comfortable?"
"A little..."
"Good. We'll travel on the way—Varanasi, Agra... you'll feel better."
"That's a good idea," her mother added.
And so—The journey began.

They visited Varanasi—the ghats, the temples, the calm of Sarnath.
They went to Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Then Allahabad, Then Lucknow,
And finally— Taj Mahal.

Seven days, Five-star hotels, Beautiful places.
But none of it stayed, Because every time she got network— She called him.

Before even understanding her own feelings—
she told everything to Joy. Every place she visited... every moment she lived...

She showed him, Through a screen, Because even after leaving—
She hadn't really gone.

Not completely.

The Distance That Didn't Look Like Distance

Radha and her family finally reached their home in Noida.
It was a large flat on the 20th floor, standing tall among endless rows of similar buildings. From outside, it looked like just another apartment. But from inside—it felt like a completely different world.

Her mother dropped her bag and let out a long breath before sitting down.

"We're finally here... I'm exhausted. Come, Radha, sit here. And call your father too."
"I'll just order something to eat first," her father said, already scrolling through his phone.

Radha didn't sit immediately.
She walked slowly through the house, her fingers brushing lightly against the walls, the furniture, the glass windows—as if trying to feel where she had come.

"This place is... really beautiful."
"Do you like it?" her mother asked, watching her carefully.
"Yes... it's so high up."
"I don't know much about that. Ask your father," she replied with a faint smile.

Radha walked closer to the window and looked outside.

"People don't come here often, right?"
"I've come here for the first time too," her mother said honestly.
"But you all used to live in Noida before..."
"Yes, but in a smaller house. Your father bought this one a few years ago."

Just then, the doorbell rang.
"The food is here," her father said.

They ate quietly, Not because there was nothing to say...
but because no one knew what to say.
After the long journey, exhaustion took over. One by one, they went to their rooms. And the house... fell silent. The next morning— Joy tried calling Radha.
Her phone was switched off. He stared at the screen for a few seconds.
"Maybe she's sleeping... or her battery is dead."

He convinced himself. But something inside him didn't fully believe it.
At the same time— Radha walked into the hall.

"Papa... where is my phone?"
"What do you need it for?" her father asked without even looking up.
"I want to call my friends."
"Which friend? Joy?"

She paused for a second.
“Yes... and Neha too.”

Her father finally looked at her.
“Your phone is with me. And you’re not getting it back.”
“Why? What did I do?”
“I’ll talk to you about it after I come back from the office.”

His voice was calm, Too calm. And that calmness felt heavier than anger. He picked up his bag and left. Radha stood there for a moment. Then slowly turned to her mother.

“Do you know where Papa kept my phone?”
“He took it with him.”
“Where is your phone?”
“He told me not to give it to you.”
“Maa... just for two minutes. I need to inform them...”

Her mother looked at her, There was a moment of hesitation. A small one. But it passed.
“I can’t go against your father.”

Radha sat down in her room, The TV was on. But the sound felt distant. The visuals meaningless.
Her eyes were open... but her mind was somewhere else.
Her mother moved around the house, arranging things, setting the kitchen, adjusting curtains. Everything outside was being settled. Everything inside Radha... was not. Meanwhile— Joy kept calling again and again.

Each time, the same result, Switched off. He tried Neha.
Same answer.
“I haven’t talked to her... her phone is off.”

Restlessness took over, Joy couldn’t sit still.
He went to her mama’s house. Her uncle was standing outside, wearing a simple vest and lungi.

“Uncle… Radha’s phone isn’t reachable. They reached safely, right?”
“Listen, son… don’t try to contact her anymore. This is your age to study. Focus on that. Radha won’t come back.”

Joy didn’t react immediately.
“But they reached safely, right?”
“Yes. They’re fine. Everyone is busy with their own life now.”

For a moment, Joy felt like asking something more. But the words didn’t come.
“Okay… thank you.”

He turned and walked away. Each step slower than the previous one.
For two days— He kept trying. Calling, Waiting, hoping, Nothing changed.
On the third day— He stood outside, looking at the sky.
Crows flying freely.
Moving wherever they wanted.
“If she doesn’t care anymore… why am I trying so hard?”

He said it softly, But even he didn’t fully believe it. At the same time— Radha stood near her window.
From the 20th floor, the world didn’t feel real anymore. Buildings looked like vertical lines, Roads looked like horizontal lines, People… like tiny moving dots.

Everything felt distant, Structured, Cold. Like a drawing without emotions.
Her fingers slowly touched the glass.
As if trying to feel something real through it.
Tears gathered in her eyes, again and again. But she didn’t let them fall.
She held them there.
Until they disappeared on their own. Days started repeating.
She stopped talking to her father. With her mother, her words became fewer.

She followed a routine— Eat, Drink water, Study.
Sometimes sing.

And every evening— When her father returned— She asked the same question.
“Papa… my phone?”

And every evening— The answer stayed the same.
“No.”

One day—
Something inside her finally broke.

“I don’t want to live here. This house feels like a jail.”
“Kids these days can’t live without phones,” her father replied.

His tone was firm, But not loud.

“Why did you take my phone?”

This time, he didn’t avoid her eyes.
“You may not remember… but I heard everything. That Valentine’s Day conversation. You broke our trust.”

The words didn’t hit loudly, They sank slowly. Deeper, More painfully.
Radha’s fingers trembled.
“Papa… I made a mistake. Please forgive me.”

There was a pause, A small one, Almost unnoticeable.
But it was there. Still—
“No. There is no forgiveness for this. And you will not get your phone back.”
“Just once… please. Let me talk to someone… I won’t call Joy. I’ll call Neha.”
“No means no.”

There was nothing left now, No argument, No explanation.
No space to breathe, Radha walked back to her room. Closed the door, Locked it. She stood still. For a few seconds. Listening, To nothing.
Her thoughts began to overlap.

Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I should have never said anything. Maybe I ruined everything. Maybe... I deserve this.
Her breathing became uneven, Faster, Heavier.
The room started feeling smaller. The silence... louder.
And then— She lost control.
She hit her head against the wall. Once, Then again, Then again.
As if the pain inside needed a place to go.

She bit her fingers, Scratched her face, Pulled her hair tightly.
Trying to replace something invisible... with something she could actually feel.
But the pain didn't reduce, It only spread.
She stopped, Fell to the floor, Curled into herself, Breathing heavily.
Waiting— for someone to come. For someone to knock.
For someone to ask— "What happened?"
But no one came, No knock, No voice, No footsteps.
And for the first time— Silence didn't feel empty.

It felt unbearable.

Chapter 6 – The Silence

A Voice Through Distance

Radha had started looking weaker.

It hadn't even been a week since she arrived in Noida, yet it felt as if the place was slowly consuming her from the inside. Her face had lost its brightness, her movements had become slower, and her silence had grown heavier.

On the other side— Joy wasn't the same either.

He had become restless, unable to focus on anything. To distract himself, he went to stay at his elder brother's house for a few weeks— hoping a change of place would calm his mind, hoping he could somehow forget Radha... or at least the memories attached to her.

But forgetting wasn't easy. And for Radha— There was nothing to forget except him. She sat in her room, staring blankly at the floor.

"Mom... it would have been better if I had never agreed to come here."
Her mother didn't respond.
"I wish... I had never gotten better."
"I wish... I had never given Joy another chance."

"Radha, what are you saying? This is not the right time for all this," her mother replied, trying to keep her voice steady.
Radha laughed faintly—bitterly. "Right time? When was the right time, Mom? Did anyone stand by me when it actually mattered?"

Her voice started shaking.
"Joy himself told me to come here... how could he do that? Who gave him the right to decide something so important for my life?"

Her fists tightened, Her nails pressed deep into her palm. But she didn't notice the pain. Suddenly— She stood up. Walked toward the window.

And then— She saw something.
A small telephone booth, standing near the corner of the society. Her eyes widened.
“There’s… a telephone booth here?”

Hope. After so many days— Something felt possible.
Without thinking further— She ran, Didn’t say a word, Didn’t look back.
“Radha! Where are you going? At least tell me! This is a new city—you’ll get lost!”

Her mother shouted, running behind her. But Radha didn’t stop. She ran faster. Turned at a corner. And disappeared from her mother’s sight.
A few minutes later— She stood inside the small booth.
Her hands were trembling as she dialed the number.

“Hello… who is this?”
“Hello… Joy. It’s me.”

There was a pause. Then—
“Radha? After so many days… why was your phone switched off? What happened?”
“You ask too many questions. Just listen first.”
“Okay… tell me.”
“My father took my phone.”
“Why? Why did you give it to him?”
“I didn’t. He took it himself… he knows everything about us.”

Joy went silent.
“What… does he know?”
“Everything.”

Her voice lowered.
“I can’t explain right now. I came to a telephone booth just to talk to you. I don’t know when Mom might come… I have to go back.”
There was urgency, Fear, And something unspoken.
“Take care of yourself, Joy.”

Before he could say anything— She cut the call.

Joy stood there, holding his phone. Relief flooded in first, She's safe.
Then came helplessness, But she's not okay.
He looked up quietly— As if complaining to God and thanking Him at the same time.
Radha ran back home. Her mother was waiting at the gate, Angry,
Scared.
Breathing heavily.

"Where did you go without telling me? Do you know how far I ran looking for you? I had no idea where you disappeared!"

Radha looked at her. Her anger was still there— But something inside her had already shifted.

"Why do you need to know everything? Just know that I was inside the society."
"Is this how you talk now? You don't even have basic manners?"

Radha paused, Realized, Took a breath.
Controlled herself.

"I went downstairs for a walk."
"Running like that?"
"It was my first time... I didn't realize how far it was."

Her mother softened slightly.
"Next time, at least inform me."

Radha nodded.
From that day— Things started changing.

Slowly, Quietly. Radha began going to the telephone booth regularly.
That small space became her only connection to Joy. A place where she could breathe.
Where she could speak freely.
At home— She changed too. Her tone became calmer. She stopped asking for her phone. Started talking to her father normally. Her behavior improved. Everything looked... better.

And everyone believed— She was finally becoming normal.
But inside— Nothing had changed. She still missed him. Not calls, Not conversations, But being there With him.

On the other side— Joy waited, Every single day.
He checked his phone again and again. Every few minutes, Waiting for her call. Living between notifications.
And when she didn't call— He called her old number. Knowing it wouldn't connect. Still trying, He asked Neha about her again and again.

Because sometimes— Even silence feels like a connection.
When you don't have anything else left.

When Things Look Fine

Even when everything at home seemed normal, something inside both Radha and Joy still felt empty.
A quiet kind of emptiness.
The kind that doesn't make noise... but never leaves.
Joy had already gone to stay with his elder brother for a while, trying to handle himself, trying to move on—at least on the surface.

But Radha—She had nowhere to go, Nothing to hold on to. Except that small telephone booth.

Even though she had started behaving well at home—talking politely, adjusting, trying to fit in—there was one thing she couldn't stop herself from asking again and again.

One morning— "What's for breakfast today?" her father asked casually.
"When will the maid come? How long am I supposed to handle everything alone?" her mother replied, slightly irritated.
"I've already spoken to a company. They assured me someone will come this week."

Radha sat quietly for a moment. Then—
"When will bhaiya come to stay with us?"

“His exams are going on. After that, he’ll have holidays. Then he’ll come.”
She nodded “Can I go to bring him?”
“No. You’re not going anywhere. Your health isn’t stable. I can’t take any risk.”

There was a pause. A small one. Then she said it again—
“Papa… can I go to our old home once?”
Her father looked at her sharply. “Why? To meet Joy again?”
“No… Joy isn’t even there anymore.”

There was silence. A sudden one.
“How do you know that?”

Radha froze.
Her mind went blank for a second.
“Wo… Papa… he told me earlier that he won’t stay there.”

Her voice wasn’t steady. But it was enough. Her father didn’t push further.
“Forget him now. You have to live here.”

Radha lowered her eyes.
“Okay.”

She quietly finished her breakfast and went to her room. Lay down,
Closed her eyes.
But didn’t sleep. In the hall—
“Why does Radha keep insisting on going back?” her father asked.
“Maybe she misses home. It’s a new place… it doesn’t feel like her own yet,” her mother replied softly.

Evening came.
“Maa, I’m going for a walk,” Radha said.
“Wait, I’ll come with you.”
“No… you’ll get tired. I’ll be back.”

She tried to stop her. But this time—
“No. I want to see where you go.”

Radha didn't argue. That evening— Joy kept staring at his phone, Waiting, No call came.
The hours felt longer than usual. Everything felt paused again, Night.
Finally— His phone rang.

"Hello?"
"Haan Joy... it's me."
"Why didn't you call in the evening?"
"Leave that... tell me how your result was."

A small shift, A distraction, Or maybe... an excuse.
"My result was really good. Everyone is congratulating me."
"Really? Congratulations! How much did you get?"
"I got 89%. And you...?"

There was a pause, A nervous one.
"I'm scared... just tell me quickly."
Joy smiled slightly "You did even better. You got 93%."

For a second— There was silence.
Then— A sudden burst of happiness.
"Really? Thank you... thank you so much!"

Before he could say anything else— She cut the call.
Radha stood still for a moment.
Smiling, But then— Reality returned.
"But... what will I tell them? How do I even know my result?"

Her smile faded slightly, She walked back home.
Her father noticed immediately.
"Where were you so late?"
"Nothing... some kids in the society were playing. I just joined them."
"Hmm."

Then he added casually—
"Next week, your brother is going to Patna for his college trip. I'm sending a car there to pick him up. If you want, you can go. It will be good for you."

Radha froze. For a moment— She couldn't process it.
Then suddenly— Everything made sense. A chance, A possibility. Double happiness, Result, And now this.

That night— She didn't sleep. She lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Hands under her head. Eyes wide open.
Thoughts running faster than ever.

"If I tell bhaiya everything... maybe I can meet Joy."
"But what if he refuses?"
"No... I shouldn't tell Joy right now."
"Let it be... I'll tell him later."

And just like that— Hope returned, Quietly, Dangerously.

Chapter 7 – The Journey

The Wall of Happiness

Three days passed.

Radha didn't rush this time. She waited—for the right moment, the right tone, the right silence in the house. A moment where her words wouldn't be immediately shut down.

That morning, she finally gathered the courage.

"Mom... can I talk to bhaiya? Please give me the phone."
Her mother looked at her carefully. "Talk in front of me."
She handed over the phone. "Hello, bhaiya... how are you?"
"I'm fine. How are you all?"
"We're okay... you're coming to Patna, right?"
"Yes, for a college function. Papa said he'll send a car."

There was a pause. A small one—but heavy.
"I'll come to pick you myself."
"Accha? You've grown up."

Radha smiled faintly. Then her voice changed.
"Bhaiya... I need to tell you something."
"Tell me."

She slowly walked into her room and shut the door. Her voice dropped, almost afraid of being heard.
"I want to meet someone."
"Who?"
"...Joy."

Silence, Not empty—tight.
"No."
"Please listen to me first."
"I already know enough."

“You don’t know anything!” her voice cracked. “You don’t know what I went through!”
“Then explain.”
“I was alone…” she whispered. “Completely alone. You people were there… but you didn’t see me.”

Her grip tightened on the phone.
“He stayed. Even when I pushed him away… he stayed.”
“That doesn’t mean you meet him secretly.”
“I’m not doing anything wrong!”
“You are putting yourself in the same situation again!”
“And you are not even trying to understand me!”

Both stopped, Breathing, Not shouting anymore. Just… tired.

“Bhaiya…” her voice softened, breaking slowly, “I’m not asking for permission to do something wrong.”

A pause.
“I just want to see him once.”
“Just once.”

Her brother didn’t reply immediately.
“You trust him?”
“Yes.”
“And he…?”
“He stayed.”
A long silence, Then a deep sigh.
“Fine.”
Radha froze. “But listen carefully. If anything feels wrong—you leave. Don’t ignore your instincts. And don’t repeat this again.”
Tears filled her eyes.
“Okay…”
The call ended.

For a moment— She didn’t move, Didn’t think.
Just stood there… holding the phone… as if something impossible had just become real.

Then suddenly— She dialed Joy.
“Hello?”
“Joy—”
The door opened. Her mother stood there. Her eyes went straight to the phone.
“Give it.”
Radha didn’t move.
“Give. Me. The phone.”
Slowly… she handed it over.
“You’re still talking to him?”

No reply.

“I trusted you.”
Silence.
“I thought you understood.”
Radha lowered her eyes.

But inside— Nothing was breaking, Nothing was shaking. I’m going to meet him.
For the next four days— She wasn’t allowed outside, No calls, No walks, No freedom.
But something had changed. Earlier, she used to feel trapped. Now—She felt like she was just… waiting.

On the other side—
Joy kept checking his phone again and again.
“What happened to her…”

The day before the journey— Evening.
The house was distracted. Radha quietly picked up the phone. Her fingers trembled.
“Hello?”
“Joy… it’s me.”
“Radha? Where were you? I kept calling—”
“I’ll tell you everything. Just listen.”

And she told him, Everything, Every detail, Every small hope, Every risk.

Joy didn't interrupt, Didn't react immediately.
Then slowly— He sat down, A smile appeared, Soft, Real.
"No happiness in the world... feels bigger than this."
Radha closed her eyes, A tear slipped out.
But this time— It didn't hurt.
"I'll see you tomorrow."
"Yeah..."

The call ended.

That night—
Neither of them slept.
Radha stared at the ceiling, replaying tomorrow again and again.
Joy kept walking from one room to another, unable to sit, unable to think straight.

Morning, Radha packed her bag, Carefully. Like every small thing mattered. She walked toward the door.
Her family stood around her. Everything felt normal, Too normal.

She held the handle.
And suddenly— Her hand stopped, Her breath tightened, Her eyes started scanning everything, Fear.
"What if someone is watching..."
"What if something happens..."

She stepped back, Heartbeat racing.
Then— She closed her eyes, Took a deep breath.
I'm going to meet Joy.
She stepped forward again.
Held the handle tightly, And opened the door.

"Bye, Mom."
"Take care."
"Call me when you reach."

She smiled, A real one.

Joy couldn't sit still, He kept walking from one room to another, Food untouched, Mind elsewhere.

Hours passed,
Radha sat in the car.
Alone.
Hands tightly clasped.
The world outside kept moving.
But inside— Her thoughts were louder.

"Just a few more hours..."

Her brother was waiting, Joy was waiting.
Everything was finally coming together.

Then— Joy's phone rang.

"Hello?"
"Joy..."
It was Neha.

Her voice was shaking.

"Neha? What happened?"
"Radha..."

She stopped.
Breathing uneven.

"Say properly, Neha."
"There was... an accident..."

Joy stood still.

"Where is she?"

Silence.

“Neha… where is she?”

His voice cracked for the first time.

“She… she didn’t…”
“What didn’t?”
“She couldn’t… survive…”

The words didn’t reach him.
Not fully.
Not correctly.

“Neha… what are you saying?”
“She’s gone, Joy…”

Silence.
For a moment— Nothing happened, No tears, No scream, No reaction.

As if his mind refused to understand.
“Neha… stop joking.”

She started crying harder.
“I saw… I saw everything…”

Joy’s grip on the phone loosened.
“No… no… you’re lying…”

But even as he said it— His voice was already breaking.

The phone slipped slightly from his hand. His legs felt weak.
He sat down slowly.
And for the first time—
He didn’t know what to think.
Because the one thought he had been holding for days— Tomorrow
No longer existed.

Presence

The night is quiet, yet the air feels different.

Not cold... not warm... just the kind of stillness that listens.

My chair feels heavier on one side — like it's holding more than just me.

I don't look to my left.

I don't need to.

There's a weight there — not the kind you touch, but the kind you sense.

Like the whisper of a rose brushing against your arm,

like a smile that doesn't need lips to exist.

Every now and then, a thought brushes past my ear — not in words,

but in the same way music hums in the silence after it stops playing.

I know it's her.

I know because my chest feels lighter... yet full.